



Students' Assessment of a Communication-Oriented E-Learning Platform

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Abstract. E-learning packaged platforms have become highly popular in Japanese tertiary English education as tools to assist students with completing standardized English certifications such as TOEIC and IELTS. However, little research has been conducted into the experiences of students with newer communication oriented e-learning platforms. This paper assesses a class of Japanese undergraduate students who completed a year-long course of English study which made extensive use of one such e-learning platform. Students were surveyed regarding the benefits and drawbacks of their e-learning experiences, including the impacts on their overall English abilities and their opinions about the platform. The findings show that students primarily expressed appreciation for the increased opportunity to expand their learning with well-organized and more contextually diverse content. The primary drawbacks included some students finding the difficulty level to be inappropriately high. There also give instructors valuable insights into how to incorporate communication-oriented e-learning platforms into their classrooms.

Keywords: E-learning · Japanese students · Blended language learning

1 Introduction

As a result of numerous improvements in efficiency and convenience made possible by computer technology, online learning options have become vital additions to universities and other educational institutions the world over. With respect to language learning in particular, e-learning is believed to give students a deeper wealth of language learning opportunities beyond the usual the classroom schedule [1, 2]. Japan is no exception when it comes to experimenting with e-learning, with some research claiming that “[E]learning is being carried out in all levels of schooling, especially in higher education” [3]. Japan remains very much behind when it comes to overall adoption of these new methods [4]. However, when it comes to English language learning, *blended learning* has become fairly normalised in higher education settings. This includes online activities included simultaneously during regular face-to-face classes, as well as assigned for homework [5]. In addition to open or free online learning resources, web and mobile based commercial e-learning platforms have also come into widespread use. These systems make it possible for educational organizations to provide students with distance learning, online

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S. K. S. Cheung et al. (Eds.): ICBL 2020, LNCS 12218, pp. 126–135, 2020.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51968-1_11

collaboration with students at different campuses, and autonomous self-study [6]. The obvious benefits for students include easy and convenient access to learning resources anytime from anywhere. For teachers, it enables managing and grading students' progress with relative ease, owing to many processes being automated. Varying from platform to platform, some of drawbacks might include the inability for instructors to customise the content, and students being unable to self-motivate, either due to the monotony of the content or other criticisms. Customisable platforms are vital for different students with different educational background and abilities. Where these platforms are specifically language learning oriented, they are most commonly used as practical training for the preparation of taking standardised tests, often necessary when applying for certain careers or graduate programmes [7].

In Japan, packaged e-learning platforms have become highly popular among students taking English courses in tertiary organisations as a tool to assist students with completing standardised English certifications, such as TOEIC, IELTS, and other supplementary materials. These materials expand students' English learning opportunities and help familiarise them with the expectations of their future employers. However, it remains common to have students work on these programmes in lockstep without having the flexibility to choose

what lessons or topics to focus on. This drawback is among others that are well understood by researchers, but the benefits remain much more numerous and pronounced [3, 8]. When conducting this research Wang et al. [3] consider the following to be the most important consideration:

“It is clear that when e-learning is employed, learners’ learning devices, learners’ learning styles, their preferred learning time and other learning habits should be taken into consideration. Fully understanding students’ e-learning habits should help e-learning teachers design an appropriate and effective e-learning program” (p. 222).

Studies have shown that investigation of students’ preferences, backgrounds, and different opinions on the use of computers in language learning is crucial knowledge for teachers to be able to provide online education successfully [9, 10]. Nonetheless, investigations of Japanese students’ own evaluations of packaged e-learning platforms remain sparse. A previous study on Japanese students’ perceptions of a similar e-learning platform as the one used in the present study suggests that different students success with e-learning varies according to their individual needs and preferences [7], a result which is in accordance with similar findings by Smart and Cappel [8]. In addition, students’ perceptions were strongly influenced by their previous language learning experiences [7] and their own proficiency levels [9]. Furthermore, Japanese students lack a great deal of verbal communication training since throughout their school years there is a persistent emphasis on standardised entrance examinations focused on grammar, vocabulary, and reading ability [11]. Therefore, those students who remain passionate about learning English tend to be eager to develop these skills above all else [12]. As yet, little research has been conducted into the experiences of students with newer communication-oriented e-learning platforms in Japan. There is a need for research concerning how these platforms might need to be developed and presented differently, for these students and others who have a strong desire to improve their communication skills.

2 The Study

2.1 Purpose

The primary aim of this study was to investigate how a class of Japanese students, who otherwise lacked substantial prior English speaking and online language learning experience, perceived a specific communication-oriented e-learning platform. Based on similar blended learning research conducted by Kobayashi and Little [9], students in this study were surveyed in order to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What do students consider to be the benefits and drawbacks of the communication-oriented e-learning platform with respect to their own learning experiences and progress?
2. How do the students perceive the benefits and drawbacks of the platform in terms of its design, functionality, ease of use, etc.?

Answering these questions may help instructors develop their own frameworks for assessing whether a given e-learning platform is appropriate for their communication-oriented blended learning classrooms, and how to introduce them to students.

3 Procedure and Settings

3.1 Participants and Settings

The participants were fifteen full-time second year male students at a Japanese university, majoring in electronics and information engineering, and life science and technology. Through their studies, the students are all sufficiently computer savvy. In addition, all the students are experienced with smartphones. They are also accustomed to the almost exclusively pen-and-paper lecture-style language classrooms typical to Japanese secondary schools. In these classrooms, the focus is on training for examinations and speaking opportunities are very limited [13]. All the students had learned English for seven years and had attained a beginners’ or a lower-intermediate level of proficiency. While students did have various amounts of experiencing using digital resources and e-learning systems, none of the students had prior experience working with online language learning in their classrooms or beyond. As a result, only a small number of students were particularly enthusiastic about the online component of the course – an experience mirrored by Kobayashi & Little [9] in their research.

3.2 Course Description

The class, in which the present research was conducted, was scheduled for one and a half hours each week in a computer room during a 15-week, two semester-long elective English courses, as a part of students' general education requirement. These courses are based on a blended learning structure combining face-to-face conventional teacher-directed instruction with an accompanying textbook, and an e-learning module. These courses are designed to encourage students to improve their speaking ability and expand their lexical and grammatical skills based on communicative learning methods. These courses are among the choices students have for their last compulsory English course that they will take as part of their regular university programmes. Therefore, they play an important role in determining how students will perform in pursuit of their engineering careers. Students were required to work on the e-learning platform both inside and outside the classroom.

3.3 Platform Description

The e-learning platform used in this study is called 'Business Speaking' [14] which provides a wide variety of English language learning exercises and practical activities. In this platform, students engage in various realistic business situations such as attending formal meetings and negotiations, making business phone calls, and conducting interviews. In order to extend students' vocabulary and expand their comprehensive knowledge of business English, these exercises cover more than 600 English expressions typically used in business situations. This platform contains 30 lessons in total, with each lesson estimated to take approximately 45 to 60 min to work through. The lessons include a variety of fundamental communicative functions which are vital for university students to acquire before they graduate from university. Examples of these functions include, agreeing and disagreeing, showing interest in other people, exchanging information euphemistically, as well as understanding intercultural communication. Another notable characteristic of this platform is that six different English dialects (American, Canadian, British, Australian, Singaporean and Indian) were used to familiarise students with different accents. Each lesson is divided into roughly five sections: listening comprehension exercises, description of lexical and grammatical phrases in the listening, grammar exercises and listening drills, pronunciation exercises requiring students to record themselves, listening skills practice, and a review test to see what students have learned throughout the lesson. These units, which include multiple choice questions, help students go over what they have learned according to a regular routine. The platform also enables students to look at audio scripts and explanations of the target grammar. This platform has been created to help students achieve a B1 level [15], commensurate to a TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) L & R score of 550–780. This platform also enables instructors to monitor how far students have progressed with their lessons. This is a computer-based platform and is compatible with smartphones.

An additional component of this platform, which was not available to students in this course, is an interactive conversation exercise conducted with a real person using internet video chat. Later speculation is offered in the discussion section regarding how this might have affected students' responses if it was included.

3.4 Student Feedback

After the courses had been completed data was collected from a 30-item anonymous questionnaire, which was distributed to the students. The aim of collecting the data was to seek opinions on the 'Business Speaking' e-learning platform. Then from their feedback, evaluate how effectively individual students were able to utilize the platform for improving their verbal communication skills, and what they thought of the platform in terms of its design, presentation, and content suitability. The rating scale used in the questionnaire was a 10-point Likert Scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 10 representing "strongly agree". The responses were totalled and averaged to attain a mean response for each question. A standard deviation was also obtained, and the findings are presented as mean \pm SD. Due to the small sample size, the data was carefully checked for outliers and none of responses needed to be eliminated. Students were also given space to provide their written responses to general questions about the quality of the platform. These written responses were used to verify the numerical scores and add insight to the overall findings.

4 Results

4.1 Survey Scores

Overall students' responses appeared lukewarm throughout the questionnaire, with an overall average score of 6.2. However, students were especially satisfied with the quantity and quality of the exercises (Q3, Q4) along with the variety of words and phrases (Q1), while being most critical of the still limited opportunities to practice speaking (Q10). Students also expressed difficulty understanding their own progress (Q9), and often struggled with the pre-recording listening content (Q2). On the whole, students tended to be quite divided, giving consistently low or consistently high scores for each question. The descriptive evaluations of these scores are made holistically with considerations for students' written feedback and classroom observations (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the questionnaire: students' satisfaction with the platform 1

	Questions	Average (\pm SD)
1.	I was able to learn the various words, phrases, and sentences	6.8 (1.2)
2.	The listening content was easy to follow as a non-native speaker	5.5 (1.6)
3.	The number of exercises was appropriate	6.7 (2.0)
4.	The quality of exercises was appropriate	7.0 (1.8)
5.	The course provided me with the skills and knowledge necessary for business situations	5.5 (1.6)

Students were divided on whether the skills and knowledge taught in the course was necessary for them in future business situations (Q5). However, they were somewhat more positive about being able to picture themselves in these scenarios (Q7). Although most students were satisfied with the quality of the explanations given for the answers to questions in the course (Q6), students were very divided about the appropriateness of the course's difficulty (Q8) (Table 2).

Students were divided on whether the course provided a valuable English learning experience (Q11). Those whose scores for this question were low expressed that they struggled with the difficulty of the exercises and, therefore, could not fully appreciate the

Table 2. Results of the questionnaire: students' satisfaction with the platform 2

	Questions	Average (\pm SD)
6.	The quality of the explanations for the solutions was appropriate	6.6 (1.8)
7.	I was able to picture myself in these business situations	6.5 (2.1)
8.	The lessons were appropriate to my English level	5.4 (2.3)
9.	The platform enabled me to recognize my own learning progress	5.3 (1.8)
10.	The platform provided me with opportunities to practice speaking	5.1 (2.3)

course (Q15). These same students did not experience any increase in their motivation to Study English as a result of completing the course (Q12). On the other hand, half of them still appeared to believe that the e-learning style of English study was right for them (Q13). There was also some controversy among students with regards to how well each of the four skills was catered to (reading, listening, writing and speaking) (Q14) (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of the questionnaire: students' satisfaction with the platform 3

	Questions	Average (\pm SD)
11.	The platform helped me to have valuable English learning experiences	6.5 (2.0)
12.	The platform helped me enhance my motivation to study English more	6.1 (2.3)
13.	The platform was compatible with how I like to learn English	6.1 (2.3)
14.	The four skills were provided in a well-balanced way	5.7 (2.3)
15.	Completing the course gave me a sense of accomplishment	5.7 (1.9)

Unfortunately, just over half of the students reported feeling a low sense of accomplishment (Q15) and found the course content difficult to navigate (Q18). However, overall students were satisfied with the design and functionality of the course (Q16, Q17, Q19) (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4. Results of the questionnaire: students' satisfaction with the functions 4

	Questions	Average (\pm SD)
16.	The platform had a simple and clear screen layout	7.1 (2.0)
17.	The platform had an easy-to-use interface	7.1 (1.6)
18.	The platform was easy to navigate	5.6 (1.5)
19.	The platform had an easy-to-use audio playback system	6.7 (2.0)
20.	The lessons were well-laid-out and easy to follow	6.7 (2.0)

Table 5. Results of the questionnaire: students' satisfaction with the overall assessment 5

	Questions	Average (\pm SD)
21.	Were you satisfied with the "explanation of the exercises" section?	6.5 (1.9)
22.	Were you satisfied with the "listening exercises" section?	6.3 (1.8)
23.	Were you satisfied with the "Review of the words and phrases" section?	6.3 (1.9)
24.	Were you satisfied with the "basic grammar" section?	6.9 (1.8)
25.	Were you satisfied with the "pronunciation" section?	6.0 (2.2)
26.	Were you satisfied with the "review" section?	6.4 (1.8)
27.	Were you satisfied with the "Test" section?	6.3 (2.2)
28.	Were you satisfied with the "Score with explanation" section?	6.5 (2.1)

4.2 Written Responses

Students' written feedback provides significant insights into how they view their elearning experiences. When asked about the benefits of the course, students provided various encouraging responses. Students thought the lessons "well-organized" and "well-written" and expressed satisfaction with being able to monitor their own learning through being "able to see [their] own progress and scores." Students also appreciated how the course would provide them with "repeated exposure" to the "large number" and "wide variety" of exercises. Students pointed out the effectiveness of being able to learn through having to do "grammar and listening exercises at the same time." More than half of the students pointed out the ease of "doing exercises with software" as opposed to having to "open up paper-based textbooks [or] exercise books." Students also expressed surprise at being "able to use [their] smartphones," something that was new to their language learning experiences. In addition, some students also stated that "the explanations and instructions were easy and straightforward to understand." There were two students who expressed that they found the exposure to the different English dialects useful. The majority of students commented favourably on the "opportunity to listen to conversations" whose "contexts were clear" or presented in "easily imagined real-life situations," which is in contrast to the exclusively exam-oriented materials from their previous English education.

It was clear from many of the students' comments that they recognised some contradiction in the goal of learning spoken English using a mostly listening-based system. Some students expressed difficulty "imagining what real conversations are like" in many of these business situations. Other students found the speakers in the listening exercises "talked too fast" for them to be able to follow. Students also expressed "disappointment with [having] limited verbal exercises" throughout the course. There were three students who lamented the fact that the course was mostly multiple-choice questions and answers. One of those students recommended improving the platform with support for voice recognition. Another student expressed that he was "unable to improve [his] pronunciation," with another noting "irrelevance between illustrations and the conversations." There was also a student who requested videos, instead of illustrations.

There were some other minor usability issues students expressed having with the platform. For example, students expressed frustration with the repeated need to provide their passwords to log in and get started. Another student wished to be able to control the speed of the listening sections. There were also various complaints about the difficulty of navigating through the system.

There was nothing in the written results that contrasted significantly with the questionnaire responses given previously.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This small-scale study of Japanese university students' views on the benefits and drawbacks of the communication-oriented e-learning platform was too small to provide reliably generalisable results or robust data. However, given that these courses are taught by the researcher (as *active research*), the accompanying wealth of qualitative observation may serve as valuable information for instructors who intend to implement e-learning into their own blended language classes, or for researchers intending to pursue larger studies. In terms of the unique contributions of using an e-learning system, in general students reported that the platform provided them with ample opportunity to self-improve their English ability with well-arranged and presented lesson and exercises. They enjoyed the familiar multiple-choice question-answer assessment style coupled with the less familiar immediate instructional feedback made possible by a software solution. Many students also highly rated the ability to monitor their own progress and scores, recognising the course's value as a self-learning tool. For Japanese who are often believed to prize conformity and controlled variation, this e-learning platform is likely to be well received by both instructors and students alike. However, given one of the ideals of online learning is the opportunity for flexibility and autonomy in the pursuit of learning goals [5], the e-learning platform does fail in this regard, making it somewhat less than ideal as a pioneering system. With regards to language learning more generally, students reported that the course helped them to improve their listening comprehension skills. This is an experience common to students participating in e-language learning courses, since improvements to listening skills are a principle benefit of blended learning [9]. The course also helped students appreciate how the business-oriented scenarios presented were true to real-life conversations which they could easily imagine. Due to the ease of doing lessons made possible by the software solution, they thought the course was effective in preparing them well for success in their future workplace, expressing confidence that the various expressions they had learned would serve them well.

However, it is clear that the primary key to success for students in this course was whether or not the content was appropriate to their language level. For those whom the lessons were appropriate, they had little difficulty acquiring the new unfamiliar functions and language characteristics. In contrast, students who reported low scores for the appropriateness of the content did not engage with exercises in productive ways throughout the course. This is of course true of any course of language learning, whether electronic or pen-and-paper based. Therefore, it remains unclear from these findings, whether or not the students performed better using this e-learning platform than they would have if they had learned the same content from a traditional Japanese English language classroom. This is an area where more research is needed, because if students do not diversify away from the learning approaches that they are used to, they may remain unable to motivate themselves to further improve and practice their speaking and other language skills [16].

The major drawback of this particular learning platform, which presents itself as a speaking course, is that many students quickly realised they would not need to rely upon their speaking skills to complete the course. Students who were enthusiastic about making improvements in this area heavily criticized the use of multiple-choice assessment and some were specifically sceptical about the legitimacy of such an assessment method in a communication-based course. This lack of speaking practice is very likely to have resulted in the majority of students failing to achieve a strong sense of accomplishment. It is hypothesized that the large amount of in-class speaking practice students were given may have emphasised the passivity and monotony generated by the aforementioned inflexibility of this particular e-learning platform. A study conducted by Lee and Im [17] agrees that as students become accustomed to online learning, their expectations and imaginations about what may be possible tend to grow. Since technologies such as voice recognition are now widely available, it makes sense that some students would wonder why this kind of feature isn't already available. This suggests that the majority of students saw the need for a close relationship between what they might do face-to-face with real interlocutors and what they learn to do using an e-learning platform. It is important to mention here that the platform can be packaged with a speaking component utilising live internet video chat with English teachers. If students had had a chance to use this component, they could have improved their speaking skills.

Overall, the e-learning course reviewed in this study proved effective in providing students with a large selection of English language content featuring many of the beneficial features intrinsic to computerised learning, including an ability to learn at one's own pace, in one's own time, with real-time feedback and progress reporting. However, in terms of the course's specific objective to improve speaking skills, this course did not provide any uniquely encouraging features. With that being said, students were largely satisfied with the included content, which focused on business English. Despite the lack of speaking practice, students who completed the course still expressed a keenness to improve their overall language skills, especially their speaking skills in the future.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of communication-oriented e-learning itself though, it appears clear that a means to increase students' opportunities to engage in conversation is essential, just as it is essential in offline learning environments as well. Whether or not e-language-learning can substitute for these more resource intensive learning environments, especially in countries where conversation with native speakers of English are difficult to achieve, remains an important avenue for future research.

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