

A follow-up study of the Facebook project for Japanese university students: Has it been enhancing student interaction, learner autonomy, and English learning?

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Abstract. This is a follow-up study of the Facebook (FB) project conducted from October 2011 to January 2013. The purpose of the project was to investigate how FB can help Japanese university students improve their English, and determine whether FB can facilitate student interaction and learner autonomy by integrating FB activities into English lessons. In the first semester, the students started to use FB for their English study. The results showed that the students' overall reaction to FB was positive and the project developed their English ability and facilitated learner autonomy to some extent. In the following year, the students were given an opportunity to exchange information and opinions with American university students. It was found that the project encouraged the students to become interested in learning about cultural differences. The project also facilitated learner autonomy to a larger extent and helped improve the students' English ability, especially in regard to grammar and vocabulary. In this study, I will present further results of the project based on a survey conducted one year after the project ended. I will also discuss whether and how FB has been facilitating learner autonomy, English learning, and student interaction in the absence of teacher-directed assignments.

Keywords: Facebook, learner autonomy, motivation, writing.

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1. Introduction

With advances in communication technologies, social networking sites (SNS) have become an indispensable communication tool. Facebook is one of the most visited sites and has reached more than 1.23 billion users worldwide by the end of 2013 (Kiss, 2014). As Prichard (2013) argued, since FB can provide a positive experience to second language learners, FB has great potential for language learning in EFL environments as a platform and link to the world.

I therefore decided to conduct a FB project with Japanese university students in order to investigate the effect of FB on English learning, student interaction, and learner autonomy. In the first semester of the project, the main goal was to help students get in the habit of writing regularly in English on FB. It was found that the project could facilitate learner autonomy and English learning to some extent. However, it was also found that most students were reluctant to make foreign friends on their own (Hamada, 2012). In the second and third semester, the students were provided with an opportunity to exchange information and opinions with American university students. It was found that the project encouraged the Japanese students to become interested in learning about cultural differences and initiating interaction with others. The project also facilitated learner autonomy and helped improve the students' English ability, especially in regard to grammar and vocabulary. The project ended in January 2013. Since then no FB assignments have been given to the students and FB activities have been entirely left up to individual students, without any control or supervision by the teacher.

This study aims to investigate the effect of the FB project on the Japanese students in the absence of teacher supervision, examining how or if student interaction, learner autonomy, and English learning have been taking place. This research investigates the following three questions.

Since the FB project ended, how has it influenced:

- student interaction?
- learner autonomy?
- the students' English learning?

2. Methodology

The FB project was conducted from October 2011 to January 2013. The participants were 13 freshmen at the University of Marketing and Distribution Sciences

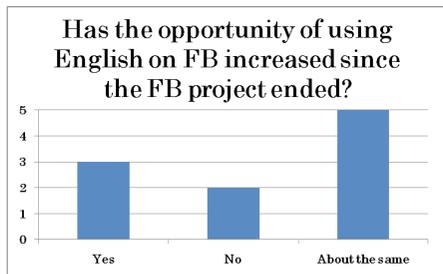
(UMDS) in Japan. A closed group was formed on FB and students were assigned homework to be used for evaluation and grading.

In the fall semester of 2011 the homework assignment consisted of a weekly topic for consideration, and all students wrote about the same topic within 4-6 lines. In the spring and fall semester of 2012 the project was conducted with the collaboration of Portland State University (PSU). A writing task was assigned to both PSU and UMDS students every week, and all students wrote about the same topic.

The project ended at the end of January 2013. At that time the number of UMDS participants was 11. A year later a survey was administered to collect feedback from UMDS students concerning their FB activities. Ten students out of 11 replied to the survey.

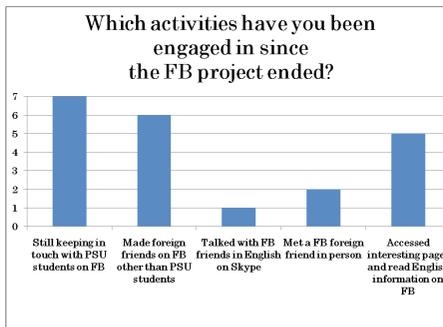
3. Results

Figure 1. Question 1



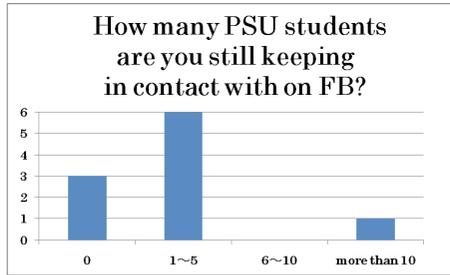
In response to Question 1, two students stated “No” (Figure 1). This indicates that eight students have continued to use English on Facebook.

Figure 2. Question 2



Concerning Question 2, seven students were still keeping in contacting with PSU students by reading their posts and posting comments (Figure 2). Six students found more friends on FB, other than the PSU students, on their own. Only one student did not do any of the activities.

Figure 3. Question 3



As for Question 3, it was found that all students except one had at least one foreign friend on FB (Figure 3). The three students who made more than 30 foreign friends studied abroad after the project ended.

Figure 4. Question 4

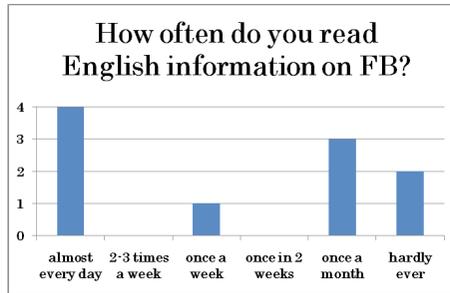
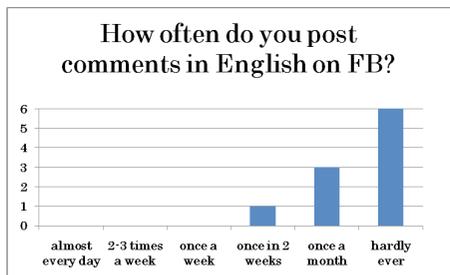


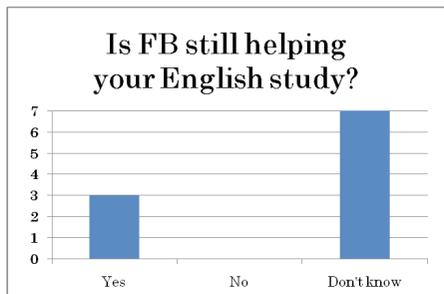
Figure 5. Question 5



As regards Question 4 there was significant variance; four students commented that they read English information on FB almost every day while five students read no more than once a month (Figure 4). The kind of English information they were getting on FB was updates on their friends' status, foreign news reports, news about favorite artists, and information about American TV dramas or movies.

Concerning Question 5, it was found that nobody was posting comments more often than once every two weeks (Figure 5). Six students out of 10 replied they hardly ever posted comments.

Figure 6. Question 6



To Question 6, three students agreed that FB was still helping them study English, while seven students were not sure about the effect of FB on their study of English (Figure 6). However, nobody answered “No”.

4. Discussion

The overall results indicate that the project has had a positive impact on the students since the end of the period of active teacher supervision.

Concerning research question one, the findings strongly suggest that the project has influenced student interaction to a large degree. The survey showed that 70% of the students were still in touch with the PSU students on FB even one year after the project ended, indicating that the project was successful enough to encourage lasting interaction without the teacher's supervision.

As for research question two, the survey indicates the project has greatly facilitated learner autonomy. According to the survey, opportunities for using English on FB have either increased or at least have been the same for 80% of the students since

the project ended. It was observed that the students have been voluntarily engaged in various activities; finding new foreign FB friends other than PSU students, getting English information on FB, or even meeting FB friends in person. These findings indicate that FB has stimulated the students' intrinsic motivation and that English has become a medium for using FB.

Another finding was that the students hardly posted comments, in contrast to reading activities. The same tendency was also found in Hamada's (2013) previous study. As Schalow (2011) pointed out, Japanese people may be "inhibited learners" who are afraid of making mistakes.

As regards research question three, the findings suggest that the project stimulated English learning, especially in the area of reading and vocabulary acquisition. It is assumed that incidental learning has occurred through various FB activities in English. This may explain the finding that 70% of the students were not sure about the effect of FB on their English study; they were not really conscious of language learning because they used English not for "mandatory" assignments, but for fun. Furthermore, reading activities on FB can be considered as "extensive reading," especially for the four students who read English information on FB almost every day. Reading activities may have increased reading speed and promoted reading fluency, as Day and Bamford (2002) claimed. It is difficult however, to measure a direct correlation between the FB project and improvement in English language skills since other variables were also involved.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the results of my follow-up study of the FB project to investigate the potential of FB for enhancing student interaction, learner autonomy, and English learning. It was found that the project was effective enough to cause lasting student interaction even one year after the project ended. The project also facilitated autonomous learning, motivating students to voluntarily engage in various FB activities in English in the absence of assignments or direct supervision by a teacher. It was also suggested that the project helped the students continue to use English on FB, and possibly improved their English language skills. The findings suggest that FB can be a very effective tool to enhance English learning and learner autonomy once the teacher sets up a comfortable and safe environment for the students and helps them make a habit of using English on FB. It is unknown how long the students will continue to use English on FB or what kind of learning outcome will be produced in the long run. It is expected, however, that the students will continue to regard FB as interesting and beneficial. It is hoped it will also

broaden their views and knowledge as a result of reading English information and communicating with people throughout the world. It will therefore provide the means to improve English ability without a sense of “studying English”.

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