

An activity using the Moodle database module in a blended learning environment to practice all four English skills with Japanese university students

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ムードル・データベースを併用したブレンディッド・ラーニングによる
日本人学生のための行動学習法
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Abstract

In this paper I will share a simple four skills activity that can be set up in the Moodle database module that “kills many birds with one stone.” In many activities in the foreign language classroom there are logistical problems that need to be overcome when an instructor wishes to do communicative activities. For example, in a class with a large number of students, 40 or more, it can be difficult and time consuming to create pairs or groups. If you want people to have multiple partners, again there is the problem of moving students around and the delays involved in the process. If the activity is paper based then there is the problem of collecting and redistributing the paper. If the instructor wants to get an idea of the students’ output, there is the added burden of sorting through all those pieces of paper and the delay that it involves. By creating an activity using the Moodle database module in a blended learning environment (a combination of in class computer work and traditional face-to-face activities) the instructor can give the students the opportunity to practice speaking, listening, writing and reading quickly and easily while monitoring student output and with students receiving timely feedback.

Keywords: Four skills, Moodle, Database Module, Blended Learning, LMS

Introduction

In Japan a majority of university students have had at least six years of English instruction: three in junior high and three in high school. For many of them it has been

with the grammar translation method with a smattering of communicative activities thrown in the mix. The students arrive at university with a basic knowledge of English grammar, a core vocabulary, and the ability to read and write simple English sentences. What the majority of them

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lack are the sociolinguistic and strategic competencies as defined by Canale and Swain (1980). In the two English Communication courses that I teach one of the goals is for the students to develop skills and techniques to be able to communicate confidently, competently and fluently with the English knowledge they already possess. To achieve this goal I am always trying to find classroom activities that require the students to use all four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) about a topic they can relate to and where they can get immediate feedback. The “Something Interesting” activity in the database module of Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), a Learning Management System, meets these three requirements.

First, I will explain the six aims of the activity followed by how to set up of the database and the classroom setting where it was used. Next, I will tell how the activity is conducted and the results of the activity. Finally, I will present my conclusions and possible areas for future research using this activity.

Aims of the Activity

In creating this activity I had six aims. First, I was looking for warm up activity to use at the beginning of the lesson. I wanted students to get into an English mode to get them ready for the rest of the lesson. Next, I wanted them to have a chance to share information about their interests and activities which is tied to the third aim of creating a stronger sense of learning community among the students. Osterman writes, “A community exists when its members experience a sense of belonging or personal relatedness...the community has a shared and emotional sense of connection.” (qtd. in Summers & Svinicki, 2007). Even though they take other courses together or belong to the same clubs they don’t always know that much about each other. I also wanted the students to improve their

speaking and writing fluencies by working with topics they are familiar, but with the pressure of time limits. There was also the desire to raise their awareness of the importance of providing details and asking for details when they aren’t provided. This idea is based on Schmidt’s (1990) noticing hypothesis that states, “...what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning.” Finally, I wanted them to become more comfortable with typing because it is an important skill for online communication.

Setting & Set up

This activity was used in English Communication II, a four-skills course for first year agriculture and veterinary medicine students. All the students had completed English Communication I in the spring semester. The course was 15 weeks and the activity started in the third week of the semester. There were three classes with 43, 30 and 12 students. The activity was conducted for 15 minutes at the beginning of each class period. The classes were conducted in a computer lab, so each student had their own computer. Two classes, one with 43 students and the other 12, were held in the largest computer lab with 60 machines and the other class, with 30 students, was in a smaller lab that had only 34 computers.

The database activity module of Moodle 1.9 was used and the database I made was very simple (Fig. 1). There is a space for the partner’s name and a text box for inputting what they learned from their partner. The database automatically puts in the date, time and the name of the student posting. In the “View List” there is a link to the comments and in the “View Single” it is possible to see any comments that have been posted (Figs. 2 & 3). In the settings for the database it is important to remember to have “Comments” set to “Yes” and “Require Approval” set to “No” (Fig. 4). Also, if you only want to students to be able to only read and comment on the other



Figure 1. Data entry form students used.



Figure 2. View list shows all the students' posting in ascending or descending order



Figure 3. View single shows the posting of an individual student and related comments.



Figure 4. Settings window for of the database

students in their class you will need to create groups and check "Available for group members only."

The decision to use the database module instead of the blog, forum, chat or online activity Moodle modules was based on the ease with which I could read the students' postings and the students could read and comment on their classmates' postings. Fellner & Apple (2006) in using blogs in an intensive English course found, "This interactive aspect of commenting on their classmates' posted messages was clearly one of the most

interesting aspects for students." However, they discovered a drawback in the commenting system of the blog.

"The potential immediacy of feedback was also cause for frustration, which sometimes occurred because student emails and comments often took several minutes to appear on the class blog." (p. 24)

I also considered using the forum module, but there is the issue of how quickly the students' post will be viewable. At the time I set up this activity there was a technical problem with my Moodle installation which

made it difficult to get prompt forum updates. In using the forum module there is also the problem of easily associating the posting student with their partner.

Using the database module solved these problems with the added benefit of being able to rearrange them in an ascending or descending order. It is also possible to easily search the entries. The flexibility and customizability that this module offers an instructor are its main strengths.

Process

The activity is broken down into three, five-minute blocks. The students were told to talk with a partner for five minutes about anything they wished as long as it was in English. It was suggested that they check vocabulary before class and were asked not to stop to check a dictionary during the five minute talking time. Both people were supposed to share something in that five-minute period. They were to be active listeners and use the expressions and techniques for keeping a conversation going that they learned in English Communication 1 the previous semester. During this stage I walked around the classroom monitoring students and providing assistance with language when needed.

To keep the amount of time required for creating pairs to a minimum the students usually spoke to the person behind them, but occasionally they would speak to the person to their right or left. From the beginning of English Communication 1 the previous semester the students had been encouraged not to sit with the same people every week and their class participation grade was partially based on how well they followed through on this requirement. Most students followed the instructions, so they did have a different partner every week.

After speaking with their partner for five minutes they had five minutes to record the information in the database. Again they were encouraged not to use

dictionaries. They were told to try to get down as many details as they could in five minutes. They were supposed to write in full sentences as a paragraph and not bullet points. They could double check information with their partner during this time if they wished.

When this five-minute block was finished they read their classmates postings and made comments and asked questions. Again they only had five minutes and they were told to try to read and comment on as many people as possible in that time. They could read anyone they wished. If they felt there was information missing or they wanted more details they were supposed to ask more questions. It could be worded as if they were asking the person who typed the information or the partner who gave the information.

I took part in this part of the activity by reading and commenting on several of students' postings. I usually looked for a student who wasn't getting any comments. After the class I would also read over the postings and comments to look for common themes and errors. The students could, if they wished, go back and answer the questions they were asked outside of class. Some students also did it in class as seen in Fig. 1 where a student answered my question (Note: Taro Urashima was student account that I created to test different aspects of Moodle from the students perspective. I also used it when I wanted to present something to the students as they would normally see it and not from my screen as a teacher.)

Results

After 12 weeks of doing the activity (we started doing it the third week and it wasn't done during the last class meeting of the semester) can I say the activity achieved all my objectives? I would have to say the results were mixed. The activity did work well as a warm up activity. The students came in, got logged into the system,



Figure 5. Students’ feelings about the “Something Interesting” activity.

and we started up with “Something Interesting” and they were into English. I also think it helped to improve the sense of a learning community. Being the second semester of the year they had already created friendships and if they had been allowed to they would have only sat by the same people every week. This activity gave them the chance to learn more about classmates that they would have never spoken with normally at this point in the academic year. The other area where I think this activity succeeded was in getting them more comfortable with typing. In walking around room during the 5 minutes they were inputting the information from their partner I could see over the course of the semester that a majority of students were typing faster. This could have been because of this activity or the fact all the homework assignments for this course were typed online and they just got better with general practice.

Did this activity help them improve their speaking and writing fluencies? To that question I have to answer I am not sure. In walking around the room during the speaking activity I heard very little Japanese, so they were staying in English. I also heard the conversation strategies they had learned in the spring semester being used, but there was still a lot of dictionary usage. This was a sign to me that they had not looked up the words they might use before class and they weren’t comfortable with or still didn’t know how to explain the meaning of a Japanese word when they didn’t know an English equivalent. The writing fluency, based on the number of words that the

students wrote in the five-minute period, didn’t seem to improve even though they seemed to be more comfortable with typing.

The other area that didn’t seem to improve was the awareness of giving details. After 12 weeks the students still only gave the most basic information. For example, a common sentence would be, “He went to a restaurant.” and in the comments people would ask “Who did he/you go with?” or “What restaurant did he/you go to? To me this shows that the students still need work in English Communication I and II with giving more detailed information. Related to this was the fact that students mainly talked about their weekends or club activities. They could talk about anything they wanted and I told them every week before starting the activity that the topic could be something interesting they had done or read in another course, or seen on TV or the internet. They still preferred to talk about the same general things week after week. I believe that the reason for this is the lack of vocabulary to discuss other topics.

One concern with doing an activity like this every week was that the students would become bored with it or not see the utility of repeating it. In my course evaluation at the end of the semester I found that four students loved the activity, 32 liked it, 31 thought it was okay, 12 disliked it and one hated it (Fig. 5). I didn’t do a follow up question to find why they felt that way, but next time that type of question will be included. These results show

that a majority of them didn't become bored with activity even when doing it every week.

Conclusion

After evaluating this activity I feel it will be worthwhile to use it again in the future. This activity allows the students to use all four skills and using the Moodle database module provides an easy method to collect student information and for them to get feedback from me and their peers. There are some changes that I will try to make to the database and the way the activity is conducted. For the database I will try to add a word count feature to make it easier to see if the students are increasing the number of words they enter from the beginning of the semester to the end. To get the students to talk about more diverse topics I will include a pull down menu or check boxes with different categories such as sports, academics, politics, and part-time job. This will also allow me to sort the postings by the categories and see which topics were the most popular. Another change that I will make is to add another five-minute period to allow the students to reply to the comments and questions left by their classmates. By doing this I hope they will be more aware of the type of information they need to give when they are sharing information with their partner or what they need to include when posting what their partner told them.

With changes to this activity and the database I think it will be possible to evaluate the students' improvements in speaking and writing fluencies. Using this activity would overcome the problems Herder (2009) met with in conducting research on extensive writing in a Japanese high school in the area of data collection and data analysis when using paper-based methods.

This activity, like many that are used by instructors interested in computer assisted language, could be done

with pen and paper, but it would be more difficult and more time consuming to do. I also think that this activity shows the power of blended learning environment where computer use and traditional classroom face-to-face interaction can be combined for an effective learning experience.

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摘要

ここでは一挙両得の Moodle・データベースモジュールを使った、英語力を伸ばす簡単な行動学習法を紹介する。外国語学習では、指導者が試みるコミュニケーション的な活動のために克服しなければならない課題がある。例えば、一クラス40人、もしくはそれ以上になるとグループやペアを作るのは時間的にも困難である。複数のパートナーを作る場合、学生を移動させるのも手間がかかる。紙を用いる活動はそれを集めたり、再分配するのも大変だ。指導者がアウトプットを把握したい場合、それら資

料の仕分けも発生し、手作業では余計に時間がかかる。

ムードルを併用した学習環境を使った行動学習法(従来からの対面型とコンピューターの合体スタイル)によって、指導者は学生に「話す」「聞く」「読む」「書く」などの練習を、より速くしかも簡単にでき、アウトプットの状況を把握し、それを学習者へ即時フィードバックができるようになる。