

Writing on Board or Paper?: Students' Attitudes toward Electronic Bulletin Board Activity

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1. Introduction

With the advent of the IT age, computers and the Internet are having a major impact on various aspects of our life. And language classrooms are no exception. Currently, much attention is being paid to the use of the computer and the Internet in L2 pedagogical practices, and the usefulness of integrating technology into language classrooms are recognized by many teachers and researchers. They believe that technology possesses many possibilities to facilitate L2 acquisition. For example, learners can access to a vast amount of information on the web, they can communicate with people in other countries through electronic communication (Torii-Williams (2004)), and they can present web publishing to a wide international audience (Warschauer et al. (2000), Richardson (2006)).

Although the importance of technology is acknowledged, it is not always easy to bring technology into the classroom because a general classroom is often equipped with only one computer for a teacher. However, asynchronous communication system such as e-mail and electronic bulletin board¹ can be used despite insufficient number of computers for students. Thus, as an attempt to bring a technology into a general classroom, I introduced an electronic bulletin board to the students and have students write English messages on the board. In this paper, I would like to examine what are the advantages or disadvantages of using bulletin boards for the writing assignments and what impressions the

students have for the bulletin board activity.

2. Literature Review

Although the research on L2 learning using an electronic bulletin board is relatively new, many researchers presented advantages of integrating it into L2 teaching. First, due to asynchronous characteristics of a bulletin board system, students were given time to reflect on and create their thoughts at their own pace. This is a great advantage for non-native speakers, as Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005) stated that “the bulletin board enabled L2 students to take the time they needed to express and present themselves in ways not always possible within the time and space limitations of a classroom” (p.96). Basharina (2009) also mentioned that bulletin board enabled non-native speakers to have time to consult additional sources and to proofread and reinforce their English.

Second, bulletin boards provide wider audience, while the audience of a traditional classroom is more limited. For example, a student’s writing assignment is usually read by an instructor who grades it. Or in the context of peer-review, the student’s writing is reviewed by one or two students. On the other hand, bulletin boards allow students to share their ideas with all the students in the class or even people outside the class, which enables them to hear multiple voices and perspectives (Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005)).

The third advantage is that the bulletin board system provides equal participation from all members of the class. Therefore, some students who do not have much confidence and feel shy about participating in face-to-face discussion can also share their opinions. For example, in Kamhi-Stein’s (2000) study, non-native speakers argued that “web-based BB (Bulletin Board) discussions reduced the cultural and linguistics barriers that often exist in face-to-face discussions” (p.448). Potts (2005) also stated that bulletin board system facilitated non-native students’ involvement in the on-line dialogue. They were equal partners with native students on line, even though those non-native students used to feel that they were “losers” during the face-to-face discussion in class. Moreover, Jiang (2012) reported that Chinese students engaged in more L2 communication on

line than in the traditional L2 classroom.

Some researchers analyzed the messages posted by the learners and explored the characteristics of communication patterns on bulletin boards. Overall, messages on bulletin boards include more reflection and critical thinking, but they are not very interactive (Pena-Shaff et al. (2001), Pena-Shaff and Nicholls (2004), Vonderwell (2003), Weisskirch and Milburn (2003)). However, when students were given a requirement to respond to others or students had a willingness to communicate with others, interaction between the students was likely to occur (Kamhi-Stein (2000), Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005)).

3. Research Questions

As we have seen, many researchers showed that electronic bulletin boards were effectively integrated into the classroom. However, what those researchers did not focus attention is how students felt about the act of writing messages on the bulletin boards. Therefore, I decided to examine the advantages and disadvantages the Japanese university students feel about writing activity using bulletin boards.

Research questions are as follows:

- (1) What are the advantages or disadvantages of doing writing assignments on bulletin board rather than on paper?
- (2) What impressions do the Japanese students have for the writing activity using a bulletin board?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The participants of the present study were 32 freshmen (30 males and 2 females) at a private university in Tokyo. All of them belonged to the department of commercial science. They were taking English Expression Class which met once a week for 90 minutes during an academic year. They have learned English

for at least six years and their English ability is at intermediate level.

4.2. Materials

For writing activity, an electronic bulletin board was created using the “Tea Cup,” a free electronic bulletin board site. In order to examine students’ attitudes toward bulletin board activity, a questionnaire including seven questions was used.

4.3. Procedures

At the first meeting in April, students were given an instruction on the bulletin board activity. Thirty-two students were divided into eight groups (four students for each group). Each group would be responsible for one writing activity on the bulletin board: They have to decide a topic, write model messages, and present and comment on classmates’ writings to the class.

Since a topic is very important to motivate students to write, I had students decide on it. They had to choose a topic which they considered was interesting to discuss for all the classmates. Before the class, the group members had to send model messages on the chosen topic, so that other students clearly understand what they need to discuss for the week. Students were given one week to send their messages to the board. The required length was more than 50 words in the first semester and more than 75 words in the second semester. A week later when the students finished sending messages on the board, the group which was responsible for the topic read all the messages and had a small presentation during the class in the following week, where they summarized and gave some comments on classmates’ postings to the class. Since there were eight groups, we had eight writing activities during the one-year course.

In the final class, the students filled out the questionnaire concerning the bulletin board activity.

5. Results

Overall, the bulletin board activity was successful: Most of the students did

not fail to send the messages and each group carried out their parts very well. Although in each topic, the students wrote interesting messages, the students' messages did not show interactions, which is in accordance to many studies described in the literature section. Some messages included the comments toward others such as "Did you buy concert ticket of 'IKIMONOGAGARI' (a pop group's name)?" "I love Chinese noodle. When you go to China, please try it." and "If you have time, I recommend you to watch 'SUMASUMA' (a TV program's name)." Yet, as I only assigned them to write one message for each topic, there was no interaction among students. During the presentations, however, the students introduced the most popular comments, read some interesting messages, and finally commented on what they thought about the classmates' postings.

The open-ended questionnaire conducted in the final class revealed the students' attitudes towards the bulletin board activity. The first question was, "Which did you mainly use to access the bulletin board, a cell phone or a computer?" Eighteen (56%) students used cell phones, whereas fifteen (44%) students used computers. Slightly more students used cell phones for this activity.

The second question asked, "Which do you prefer for writing assignments, writing on bulletin board or writing on paper? Give the reasons." Twenty (63%) students liked bulletin board better. As for the major reasons, twelve students said that using cell phones allows them to write and submit the messages anytime and anywhere. Seven students said that it was easier to type than write. Other comments were "I can practice using computers," and "I can check spellings." On the other hand, twelve (37%) students preferred writing on paper. Among them, nine students said that it was easier to write on the paper than type. Other comments were, "Cell phones are likely to invite spelling errors," and "The words will be remembered better if we write by hands."

Third, the questionnaire asked the advantages of the bulletin boards. Like the answers for the second question, thirteen students (41%) said that they can write and submit the messages anywhere and anytime. Many students did this activity while they were commuting on the train. Eleven students (34%) said that the advantage is we can read the classmates' writings. As for minor reasons,

two students said that it is easy to check and rewrite through computers. One student said that he enjoyed a new experience. Another student said that writing on bulletin board was not as formal as writing on paper, so he could have fun doing the activity.

The fourth question was on the disadvantages of the bulletin boards. Twelve students (38%) said that it was a lot of work to type English. Seven Students (21%) said that typing caused more spelling mistakes than handwriting because many students are not used to typing English.

The fifth question asked if the students read the postings by classmates. Three (9%) students read all the time. Twenty-four (75%) students read sometimes. Five (16%) students never read them. Therefore, 84% of the students read the postings at least sometimes. As for the major reasons, thirteen students read the classmates' messages to build on the ideas for their own writing. Seven students were interested in looking at other students' opinions or their English writing. On the other hand, the reasons why five students did not read the postings were that they did not have time to read the messages and that they did not feel like reading English.

The sixth question examined which topics students enjoyed writing. The topics they discussed were "TV programs," "favorite sports," "my college life," "my high school days," "memory of this summer vacation," "favorite music," "countries I want to visit," and "favorite books." The three most popular topics were "favorite sports," "memory of this summer vacation," and "favorite music," while the least popular one was "favorite books."

The final question asked the students whether their English writing skills improved through this activity. Twenty-two (69%) students said that there was no change. Only eight writing assignments in a year might not have been sufficient for many students to feel that they improved their writing abilities. Nevertheless, ten (31%) students thought that they improved especially on the ability to express their opinions in English.

6. Discussion

The results of the questionnaire showed the students' attitudes toward the electronic bulletin board activity. First, it became evident that more students did the activity through cell phones than computers. The previous studies did not mention about the accessibility of bulletin boards through cell phones; however, considering the results of this study, we should pay more attention on the use of cell phones for bulletin board activity.

Additionally, from the questionnaire, we could see students' opinions on both advantages and disadvantage of bulletin boards. After having completed the writing activities on the bulletin board, 63% of the students preferred writing on boards than on paper. The first reason was that through cell phones students could write and submit the messages anytime and anywhere. The second reason they preferred the bulletin board was that they could read the classmates' messages. It was found that 85% of the students read classmates' messages. Like the students in Pena-Shaff and Nicholls (2004), many students in this study read others' writings to develop their own ideas. Some students said they enjoyed reading classmates' opinions, while some were interested in looking at English writing of others. Two students commented that they sometimes compared their own English writing with others in terms of grammar and vocabulary. One student mentioned that he could learn many English expressions by reading others' messages. With regard to writing on paper, students usually do not have much opportunity to read others' writing. Thus, the sharing of the messages among all the classmates is the great advantage of a bulletin board system. However, some students said that they read others' messages when the topic was interesting and that the uninteresting topics did not motivate them to read. Therefore, it is important to choose a topic that arouses students' motivation to engage in the activity. In this study, the top three topics the students liked to discuss were on sports, summer vacation, and music.

In contrast, 37% of the students preferred writing on the paper. The main reasons were that it was a lot of trouble to type English and that sometimes typing caused them to make more spelling errors. They said that writing was

much easier than typing, for they were not accustomed to typing English. But if students can practice English typing through this activity, they will become better at it. In fact, one student considered the advantage of board activity to be the improvement of computer skills.

Finally, because I only had students post their messages once per topic, there was no interaction between students. However, group presentation provided the opportunity to hear the students' reflections and comments on classmates' messages.

7. Conclusion

The present study examined the students' opinions on electronic bulletin board activity and revealed that the students felt the activity had more advantages than disadvantages. However, it should be noted that the number of the participants was small and that they were mostly male students, it may be difficult to generalize the results. Nevertheless, the results showed some interesting points. This study dealt with the accessibility of bulletin board from cell phones, even though the use of cell phones has never been mentioned in other studies on bulletin boards. Since the participants of the present study considered the main advantage of the bulletin board as the accessibility from cell phones, we should pay more attention to the cell phones in the future research of bulletin boards. Additionally, this study differs from other studies in that it compared bulletin boards with writing on paper, while other studies often compared bulletin boards with face-to-face discussions in the classroom. The results showed that although the students were used to writing English on paper and the bulletin board activity was a new experience to them, 63% of them preferred writing on the board.

Because the activity of this study required only one posting per topic, interactions among students did not occur. In the future study, it would be intriguing to examine how students' impressions on bulletin boards change, if the students are required to interact with the classmates by having to respond to others' messages.

Notes

1. Electronic bulletin boards (also known as message boards or as computer forums) are online communication systems where one can share, request, or discuss information on just about any subject.
(<http://www.inc.com/encyclopedia/electronic-bulletin-boards.html>)

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