

Japanese Students' Attitudes towards Hybrid Learning

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Abstract. This paper summarizes the research work conducted for a survey of a group of Japanese University students' attitudes towards a hybrid language learning course. It determines how two different ways of teaching, traditional in-class structured and online unstructured lessons, significantly affected their perceptions about their learning English in a foreign language (EFL) course. As an introduction to the reader, a brief background of implementation of hybrid learning into the classroom is provided, followed by the description of hybrid approaches in Japanese educational settings. Then the objectives and the results of the present study are explained. The findings suggest that some instructional factors, such as flexibility, goal focused approach as well as closely connected relationships between in-class and online instructions, are indispensable for students to acquire a set of skills and strategies for successful language learners in hybrid learning environments.

Keywords: Japanese, language learning, online instructions

1 Introduction

As computers have become widely used in the language classroom, interest in mixed-mode learning or hybrid learning has significantly increased throughout the world [1] [2]. The courses based on hybrid learning are defined as "classes in which instruction takes place in a traditional classroom setting augmented by computer-based or online activities which can replace classroom seat time"[3]. Numerous studies have indicated that using the combination of traditional and online instructions is regarded as a panacea for the students' development of language skills and is more effective than before [4, 5]. This approach has also been recognized as a perfect solution to support individualized learning as well as to help students' lifelong learning even outside the classroom [6]. One of the problems of this growing trend is that not much time has been spent to examine how to combine both online-based and classroom-based approaches for an effective structure of hybrid learning. A mix of these approaches does not "fit easily into the organizational structure of higher education administration"[7]. In addition, focus has often been placed on a variety of applications of online activities and computer programs rather than on different students' perceptions of this innovative language learning environment. More emphasis should be placed on the exploration of specific key factors which affect

students' attitudes towards various approaches implemented in the hybrid learning modes.

2 Hybrid Learning in Japan

E-learning courses in Japanese tertiary institutions have recently begun to play an increasingly important role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. 69.3 percent of the national universities surveyed in Japan have offered e-learning classes [8]. Computer-based educational platforms, such as Blackboard and WebCT, have also been introduced into many language courses as an integral part of their curriculum designs [4, 6]. With the development of these e-learning technologies, hybrid learning courses have been implemented either as a mainstream methodology or as a supportive or supplementary role to the traditional courses [6, 9]. Although this technology in the language classroom is a rather new development in Japan, there are two major problems with regard to the effective implementation of hybrid learning.

The first major concern to be considered is how the instructor should deal with students' culture-specific styles of language learning. In the Japanese traditional educational contexts, the teacher-centered classroom structures are still highly valued. As in many other Asian countries, students are accustomed to a lecture type class where they are passive recipients of knowledge offered by the instructor [10]. This learning culture and individual students' commitment directly affect their learning process and their motivation to learn a language in a new environment. This is because e-learning, in general, requires more responsibility on the part of the student. In order to promote students' self-directed learning strategies and to stimulate their interest to the learning process, the development of pedagogical approaches that are sensitive specifically to Japanese cultural traditions is indispensable.

Another challenge to be considered in hybrid learning is a lack of understanding of an effective combination of traditional classroom instructions and online learning. Using online learning as supplement classroom instruction or extra follow-up practices is based on the assumption that, by simply giving individuals access to technology, it is expected to enhance student autonomy and support individualized learning [6]. However, how to blend two different modes of instructions, which will successfully improve the quality of the learning experience, has not been fully examined. It is important for the instructor to evaluate students' perceptions and attitudes when integrating new online teaching approaches into the conventional face-to-face component in a language course.

3 Listening and Language Awareness Activities

It is generally recognized that listening comprehension plays an important role in facilitating successful language learning [11, 12]. For students studying English, however, learning 'listening' has long been regarded as one of the most problematic areas which requires appropriate use of a variety of different approaches, skills and

strategies [13]. In Japanese educational settings, how to effectively develop students' listening skills has long been the subject of much concern and debate. It has been well accepted that Japanese students find listening to English extremely difficult. This is partly due to a fact that Japanese students do not have much opportunity to be exposed to vast amounts of authentic English information in everyday contexts. In order to overcome this inherent problem, a variety of online listening activities have recently been developed in tertiary institutions. These activities are resources which can be used in and out of the class. Although these technology-enhanced listening lessons and practices are valuable resources which are readily available online, they commonly include drill exercises and gap filling comprehension tests. They are simply opportunities for students to practice listening to English and, therefore, are often regarded as passive activities [14]. As research has indicated, merely exposing students to these kinds of listening exercises is not adequate instruction for improving listening comprehension [15].

Recent studies on a more active approach to developing listening skills have pointed to the key role in identifying and grouping lexical and syntactic forms in the spoken discourse. This is based on the notion that spoken texts are determined by the context which includes word combination and structural patterns [16]. Having students access language data and discover the lexical patterns, that are associated with a specific word or phrase, is one of the effective approaches for developing their language learning skills [17-19]. This approach, called 'data-driven learning' (DDL), as defined by Johns [20], allows students to pay closer attention to the target word in rich contexts and to make reasonable conclusions about the structural rules of the target word. However, relatively little research has been conducted to determine how this teaching approach encourages Japanese students to increase their language awareness and helps them to engage in a more active process of learning a language.

4 Program Design and Development

Realizing the importance of developing a computer system which helps Japanese students understand phrases and sentence patterns effectively and efficiently in language data, the authors designed and developed a computer program, called *Lex*, which performs the simple function of searching and extracting all the occurrences of a certain key word or phrases in language data. *Lex* is a user-friendly program for retrieving and displaying collocational and lexical patterns, which are associated with the key word, from any kind of text data. The search results can be displayed in Key Word In Context (KWIC) mode in a plain text document. Key words are displayed with approximately six words on either side. This program, with a simplified easy-to-use interface, has been designed specifically for students without any lexical experience. *Lex* was installed in an Apache web server with Tomcat on a Linux computer. With this program, students can independently consult various collocational and lexical patterns which are associated with the key word. This program is accessible on campus or at home. Its access is restricted to registered students. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate two different interfaces of *Lex*. Figure 2 shows that the words *make* and *take* occur in the language data. As seen from these examples,

it is possible for students to formulate basic rules about the way *make* and *take* work. For example, *make a friend*, *make contact with*, *make a reservation*, *take a rest*, *take care of*.

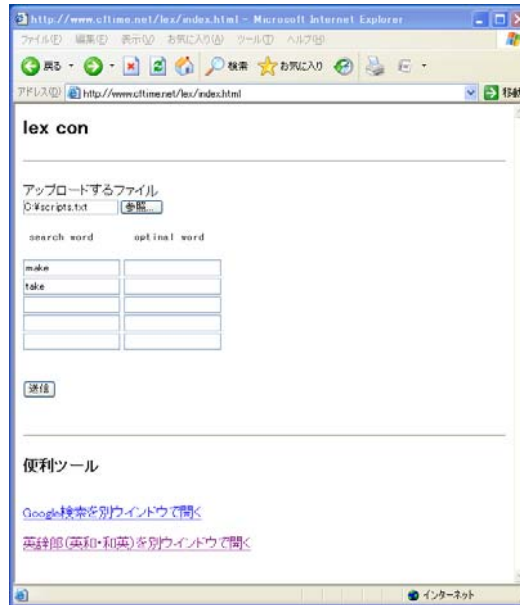


Fig. 1. Interface design of *Lex*

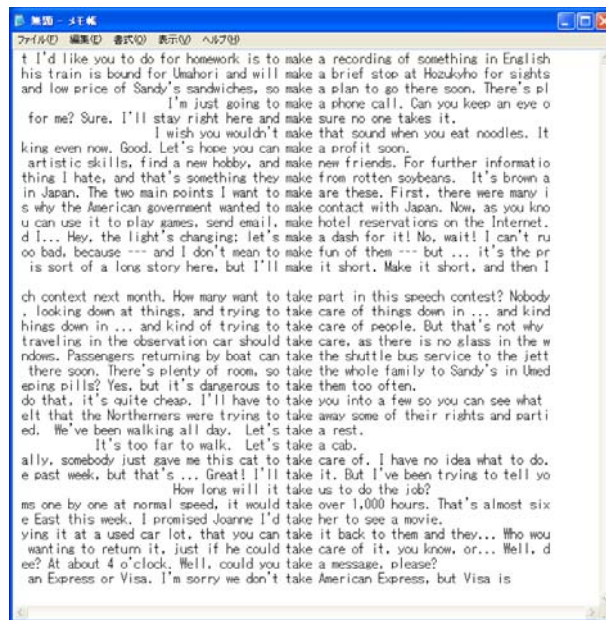


Fig. 2. Search results by *Lex*

5 The Study

5.1 Purpose

The primary aim of this study is to determine how students who are used to passive and deductive learning approaches perceive hybrid learning in a language course. This course was designed to assist students to improve English listening by emphasizing the development of lexical skills. The following issues were specifically focused on.

1. What is the impact of the hybrid learning environment on students?
2. How do students perceive the difference between the traditional face-to-face learning and the web-based independent learning?

How this new technology can enhance students' language learning will be determined based on previous studies of the effectiveness of using hybrid learning systems in the language classroom.

5.2 Students

The respondents consisted of thirty five first year undergraduate students studying engineering at a Japanese national university. They were used to traditional teacher-directed step-by-step instructions in a large lecture-type classroom. They were also familiar with passive and sequential learning approaches which can often be seen in most engineering education [21]. Many students had limited computer competency with no previous experience of independent learning. 51% of the students had almost no experience in listening to English in their daily lives. All of the students had learned English for at least six years in secondary school in which listening was not a skill that was given much attention. Therefore, most of the students were properly motivated to improve their listening ability. Their level of English ranged from high-beginners to intermediate.

5.3 Course Design

A hybrid learning course was designed in order to encourage students to improve their English listening and lexical skills. This course was compulsory. Although the course comprised of both conventional teacher-directed instructions and online self-paced independent studies, these two different educational approaches were closely related with regard to the content and the materials the students used. Therefore, the entire course was a continuous process rather than a discrete event. The class was scheduled for one and a half hours each week over a 14-week course in a computer assisted language learning (CALL) classroom. The course which was divided into two phases is outlined as follows.

	First Phase	Second Phase
Objectives	Using a textbook, the students engaged in listening comprehension practices in the traditional teacher-directed classroom.	Based on textbook data, the students independently consulted various lexical patterns by using <i>Lex</i> . They were encouraged to understand patterns of usage and work out the rules for themselves.
Details	The first seven-week phase consisted of the traditional classroom teaching mode, in which the students were provided with listening comprehension lessons, with a variety of spoken texts and recordings with transcripts. These lessons were designed to help students comprehend main ideas, details, inferences, and language functions.	The second seven-week phase is the web-based independent component of this course. The aim was to increase the students' awareness of important language features and their functions in the discourse community. This component was also designed to focus on the understanding of a variety of lexical phrases which would be useful for enhancing students' interpretation of discourse.

Before the project started, there was a period of guidance which was offered by the instructor for the purpose of making students understand the basic concepts and techniques for the works. In addition, sample activities were given to the students about how to understand various language forms from the data. The students were instructed to organize their finds by focusing on various language features such as the use of adjectives, verbs and prepositions, and to examine collocations and other lexical combinations. After that, the students compared their own work with other students and discussed the use of words and expressions in the classroom.

5.4 Student Responses

After the course had been completed, data was collected from a 14-item questionnaire which was distributed to the students. The purpose was to gauge their opinions and attitudes towards their hybrid learning including the advantages and disadvantages of the course. The students were required to answer the questions anonymously. The rating scale used in the questionnaire was a 10-point Likert Scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 10 representing "strongly agree". In order for students to fully understand the questionnaires, the questions were written in Japanese. For the purpose of attaining a mean response for each question, the responses were totaled and averaged. Standard deviation was then obtained for the purpose of examining statistically significant differences between students' responses. The data is presented in this paper as mean \pm SD. The questionnaire was also analyzed by using Spearman's correlation to determine correlations between responses and significant factors underlying their responses. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). For the purpose of determining whether the type of course and the way of teaching

significantly affected students' attitudes toward their hybrid learning, the students were required to answer open-ended questions and report how they felt about the course.

6 Findings

The results revealed the students' different values and attitudes to the hybrid learning approach. With regards to the effectiveness of the online independent learning mode, the overwhelming majority of students preferred the flexible online component to the conventional language courses. The Average (\pm SD) of this response was 9.00 (\pm 1.18). In addition to the fact that many respondents highly valued the online component of the course itself, they felt that the close combination between in-class instructions and online lessons offered by the course was effective. The online activities encouraged students to assess what they had learned in the previous teacher-directed component of the course. There was a moderate correlation between those who valued the online component and those who valued the close combination between in-class instructions and online lessons ($r = .717, p < .01$). In addition, many students found the online component helpful in understanding lexical phrases and improving their listening skills. The analytical process of consulting various lexical patterns by *Lex* helped to enhance and clarify the understanding of various useful expressions and key phrases. The Average (\pm SD) of this response was 7.66 (\pm 2.08). The correlation of .449 was significant between those who valued the analytical process and those who valued the close combination between in-class and online components. There was no correlation between those who required plenty of online training and those who did not value the effectiveness of the hybrid learning.

Table 1. Correlation between factors for effectiveness of the hybrid course

	High appreciation of the hybrid approach	Close combination between in-class and online	Future need for the hybrid approach
High appreciation of the hybrid approach	1.00	----	----
Close combination between in-class and online	.717**	1.00	----
Future need for the hybrid approach	.741**	.780**	1.00

Notes: Correlation Matrix ($N=35$), ** $p < .01$.

Table 2. Correlation between factors for effectiveness of the hybrid approach

	Close combination between in-class and online	Improving lexical skills	The use of the web
Close combination between in-class and online	1.00	-----	-----
Improving lexical skills	.449**	1.00	-----
The use of the web	.660**	.369**	1.00

Notes: Correlation Matrix ($N=35$), ** $p < .01$.

In addition, there was a moderate correlation between those who appreciated the effectiveness of the hybrid methodologies and those who required similar approaches in their future studies ($r = .741, p < .01$). Many students stated their willingness to use the web as a source of linguistic data for their language learning. The Average (\pm SD) of this response was 6.94 (\pm 1.71). Those who highly rated the close combination between in-class and online components had a moderate correlation with those who valued the use of the web as a student learning resource ($r = .660, p < .01$). As for the amount of language data the students were exposed to the majorities of students stated that they were appropriate. The Average (\pm SD) of this response was 7.17 (\pm 1.83).

Table 3. Correlation between factors for effectiveness of the hybrid course

	Improving listening skills	Goal focused approach	Effectiveness of independent component
Improving listening skills	1.00	-----	-----
Goal focused approach	.743**	1.00	-----
Effectiveness of independent component	.498**	.423**	1.00

Notes: Correlation Matrix ($N=35$), ** $p < .01$.

There was a moderate correlation between those who realized the effectiveness of the course in improving their listening skills and those who valued the goal focused approach offered by the course ($r = .743, p < .01$). The correlation of .498 was significant between those who found the effectiveness of the course in improving their listening skills and those who valued the goal focused approach.

As for the negative aspect of the online component, 28.5% of the students stated that they frequently visited Websites which were not relevant to the class. However, there was no correlation between those who were frequent visitors of irrelevant Websites and those who did not value the effectiveness of this hybrid learning.

6.1 Student Comments

The students expressed distinct opinions about the course they had taken. In their comments, students suggested that the experience of hybrid learning was beneficial to the students in the following two ways. Firstly, when asked about the advantages of the course, the majority of students reported that they highly valued its independent, self-paced component during the online lessons. The flexible delivery of the materials, such as digital audio data, *Lex*, and accessing from remote sites, also brought enormous benefits for their language study. This finding is in accordance with the results of the students' questionnaire explained above. The comments made by the students also suggest that they highly valued the flexibility in analyzing the language data and deciding what worked and what did not work for improving their language skills on their own. These students liked taking an active role in directing their own study at their own pace more than following sequential step by step instructions. Ten students stated that they were fully satisfied with an educational environment which they could actively engage with and control by themselves. These students didn't seem to have any problems with shifting from lecture-type instructions to student-centered instructions.

Secondly, the students' constructive comments have shown that another advantage of this course is the fact that it encouraged students to engage in critical thinking and reflect on what they had learned through their previous language learning experiences in the face-to-face instructions. In combination with traditional classroom-based education, the students stated that the web-based analytical activities helped them raise their awareness of various meanings and usages of the words and expressions they had previously listened in the classroom. Sixteen students stated that discovering the results from the data was highly motivating and rewarding. None of the students had difficulties in identifying regularities in the language data. This integration of reflective and experiential learning process aided them in considering not only what and how they had learned a language but also how they would be able to solve their own language problems in their future studies. These comments also support the results of the questionnaire described in the previous section.

With regards to what they didn't like about the course, three students stated that the analysis of the language data by using *Lex* was time-consuming and laborious. Some students reported that they did not know what to do in front of their computers once they had completed their own activities. Other students reported that they also did not know what to do in front of their computers because the activities offered

were too difficult for them to deal with. In addition, some participants indicated that there was a problem with the different levels of involvement in the activities throughout the course. Without the instructor, some students seemed to be at a loss what to do during the online independent lessons.

7 Discussion and Conclusions

Although the sample size is too small to allow any generalization, at least in the statistical sense, the data collected in this study offered valuable information which instructors should take into account when implementing hybrid learning approaches in language courses in Japan.

First of all, the results of this study suggest that the hybrid approach can foster the development of students' critical and reflective thinking, under the condition that flexibility as well as the successful combination of both in-class instructions and online lessons are provided. This is consistent with earlier studies [1, 22]. As the findings suggest, as would-be engineers who were inclined to enjoy researching data, the students acknowledged the value of examining patterns and occurrences of particular words or phrases on their own with the aid of *Lex*. It is also important to note that many students were observed to be actively involved in the analytical process even if the instructor was not directly involved in the instructional process during the online lessons. There is an indication that different modes of instructions were fully appreciated by many students as long as the course accommodated the students' learning needs and preferences. In order to make a hybrid course effective and productive, both the classroom lead by the instructor and independent learning should be goal-oriented and well-organized. It is also important for the instructor to encourage students to be more aware of their learning process and help them consciously examine their own contribution to this process.

Secondly, the instructor should acknowledge the fact that there are always some students who feel more secure when being spoon-fed instructions. The results suggest that there were some students who were reluctant to take charge of their own learning during the unsupervised lessons. This finding is in accordance with the fact that the students who were involved in independent learning still showed a strong preference for teacher-directed learning environments [23]. Based on the data given by this study, it was concluded that the Japanese students perceived their language learning in different ways and different approaches provided them with different impacts. These results are in accordance with the findings of Jung and Suzuki [24] who claim the importance of online education which deals with the diversity of language learners.

Although more research is necessary and many different factors should be explored, it is hoped that the findings of the present study will create new research questions. For example, what are the major characteristics of the students who can maximize their computer-based independent learning effectively? What should the instructor do to accommodate multiple teaching methods when dealing with a more diverse student population in the classroom? Answering these questions will enormously contribute to the future development of successful hybrid language courses.

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Preferences

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