Student Engagement with an Online Pre-enrolment English Course at a Japanese University

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Abstract: The authors manage an English language course for high school students who successfully apply for early enrolment to a Japanese university each year. The course is non-credit bearing and although encouraged, participation is at the students' volition. Its primary aim is to help students maintain their English language skills in the four or five months before university lectures start in early April. In keeping with the university's practice of utilising technology in the classroom, the majority of the course is online, using the open-source Moodle LMS. The online portion of the course includes interaction with their future classmates and upperclassmen (currently enrolled at the university) in asynchronous forum discussions. In this way, too, students create their own course content. The success of such a course depends on the level of student activity, and as such the authors have an interest in maximising this. This paper will describe the key features of the 2017 iteration of the course and the extent to which students engaged with it. The results of a post-course student survey will be analysed to understand students' opinions of the course, and the main impediments to student engagement. Based on these, some possible changes for the 2018 version will be described.

Keywords: Moodle, Japan, English, course design

1. Background

1.1 The University Enrolment Process in Japan

In Japan, approximately three quarters of high school students enter a university or other higher education institution after graduation (MEXT, 2011, p.10). There are three main streams through which high school students enrol in universities. The most commonly used one is the General Entrance stream, held in January and February, with results published less than two months before the academic year starts in April. Most universities also offer places to a limited number of students through one or two alternative streams. These are the "Suisen" (Recommendation) and the AO (Admissions Office) entrance streams. In these, students are given an opportunity to argue their suitability for an institution on the basis of their academic performance, aptitude and other achievements.

Universities typically publish the results of the AO and Suisen exams in the period from mid-November to mid-December, however some universities release them as early as September (Iwate Prefectural University, 2017). While early acceptance creates significant security for both the university and student, this situation can have wide-ranging negative impacts. Many high schools have a strong focus on university entrance and have classes devoted to exam preparation. With no entrance exams to prepare for, students who have been accepted early lose their primary motivation to study, and they can distract or disturb their classmates who are still preparing for exams. Unless their teachers create additional activities, accepted students have little motivation to study, which can result in decreased study skills and study habits. Students who have an extended break from study can experience a difficult transition to university life, with further flow-on effects for their new classmates.

In order to maintain student motivation and allow for a smooth transition to tertiary studies, some Japanese universities provide students who pass their Suisen and AO entrance exams with a supplementary program of study during the last months of high school, called a pre-enrolment course.

1.2 The Setting

The authors' university offers 4-year courses in fields relating to computer science and information design. There is a strong emphasis on the use of technology for learning. Four courses are fully online and an increasing number of classes have a blended learning format. English is not a major, however there are compulsory English language courses, and English is used as a medium of instruction and assessment in first- and second- year Communication classes. Thus, students are expected to have at least a basic level of English language skills.

The university holds Suisen and AO entrance exams each year, and the results are published by early December. Approximately 100 students are offered a place, which is equivalent to 40% of the annual first-year student intake. Pre-enrolment courses in English and mathematics have been offered to students since 2003, and the authors have been responsible for the design and management of the English course since 2014.

1.3 Course Format

When designing the pre-enrolment English course in 2014, the authors considered three formats: on-campus, paper-based and online. In an on-campus course, students gather at the institution for a series of events with teachers. A paper-based course involves sending students written material which, upon completion, is sent to the teacher for grading and then returned to the students with feedback. An online course uses a learning management system (LMS) to provide students with materials and activities. Smith *et al.* (2017) discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each in relation to the authors' university.

The most attractive option was the online format, as all of the benefits were in alignment with the university's philosophy. The drawbacks, though not insignificant, were considered manageable. The decade to 2016 saw significant increases in both internet penetration (Internet Live Stats, 2017), and smart device ownership in Japan. (eMarketer, 2017). While online courses require some ICT skills, this was seen as a good opportunity for students to develop these skills, which will be used regularly from April. For these reasons, the authors chose the online format.

1.4 The Students

First-year students at the authors' university have the following general characteristics: low motivation to study English, low English language skills, and little-to-no experience with e-learning. Each July, first-year students take the TOEIC Bridge test, which is designed for false beginners of English. Data for the 2017 cohort was unavailable at the time of writing, however the 2016 cohort's mean grade was 134 out of 180, which is equivalent to a TOEIC score of approximately 370 (ETS, 2006) or a CEFR level of A2 (ETS, 2015). Averages for previous years were also similar.

In early December 2016, a total of 98 students had been offered places at the authors' university resulting from the AO and Suisen entrance exams. They were made aware of the pre-enrolment course and all said that they would participate in it.

2. The 2017 Pre-enrolment English Course

2.1 Aims

Although the primary focus of the course is English, it is designed to provide students with a multifaceted learning experience. Thus, the aims of the course are to provide opportunities to:
- improve students' English language skills, in particular reading and writing;
- experience e-learning and develop their ICT skills;
- communicate with their future classmates; and
- learn about and prepare for university life.

2.2 Course Design

The course is non-credit bearing and participation is voluntary, so care was taken to make it accessible and attractive to students. Instructions and explanations mailed to students were bilingual, and students could choose their preferred language in the Moodle course.

It was suggested to students that they access the course for at least two hours a week. The authors were mindful of the likelihood that many students would access the course less frequently, and made all content and activities "stand alone" and available until the end of the course.

In recent years there has been an increase in students accessing the course using a smartphone or tablet as the main device. In addition to choosing a Moodle theme designed to adapt to smaller devices, a number of modifications to the course design were made in order to accommodate mobile use, such as making images and PDF files responsive, which makes them easier to read on small screens.

The course included a number of resources and activities, including the following:

- A self-introduction forum. As the first forum in the course, it contained more detailed instructions on how to create a post and how to add media such as photos.
- Weekly discussion forums. These were designed for students to communicate with each other in English and to learn more about their classmates. The topics were designed to elicit student ideas and opinions, with some having an emphasis on academic reflection.
- Reading activities. In January a book was sent to students: Oxford Bookworms' *The Coldest Place on Earth*. This is an illustrated Stage 1 graded reader about early Antarctic exploration. This was supplemented with online quizzes.
- A virtual exchange. A short virtual exchange with current second-year students took place, in which they described their everyday university lifestyles using text and photographs.
- English grammar resources. Access to an in-house online language learning resource called English Foundations was provided for the students.
- Information about the university. This was a series of photos and explanations written in English by a student who assisted with administering the course.
- An open forum. Students could discuss any topic they wished to in Japanese.

As can be seen, the pre-enrolment course offered a combination of communicative activities and self-study opportunities.

3. How Students Engaged with the Course

As a way of assessing the course's effectiveness, the authors examined the level of student engagement to identify issues related to student engagement. By pairing these findings with survey results (Section 4), a more complete understanding of the student experience is possible.

3.1 The Moodle course

As mentioned previously, one of the benefits of an online course over a paper-based course is the ability to get an understanding of student activity by reviewing the course logs. Thus, the authors could determine how often the students accessed the course and what kinds of activities they engaged in.

The 2017 cohort consisted of 98 students. It was recommended that they access and participate in the course for at least two hours a week during the 14 weeks it was running. If a student did this, they would have accessed the course on a minimum of 14 separate days. Figure 1 below shows the number of days each student accessed the Moodle course. Nineteen students, referred to as high-access students, accessed the course on 14 or more individual days, which means that weekly access was *possible*. A total of 77 students accessed it on less than 14 days; they are referred to as low-access students. Two did not access the Moodle course at all.
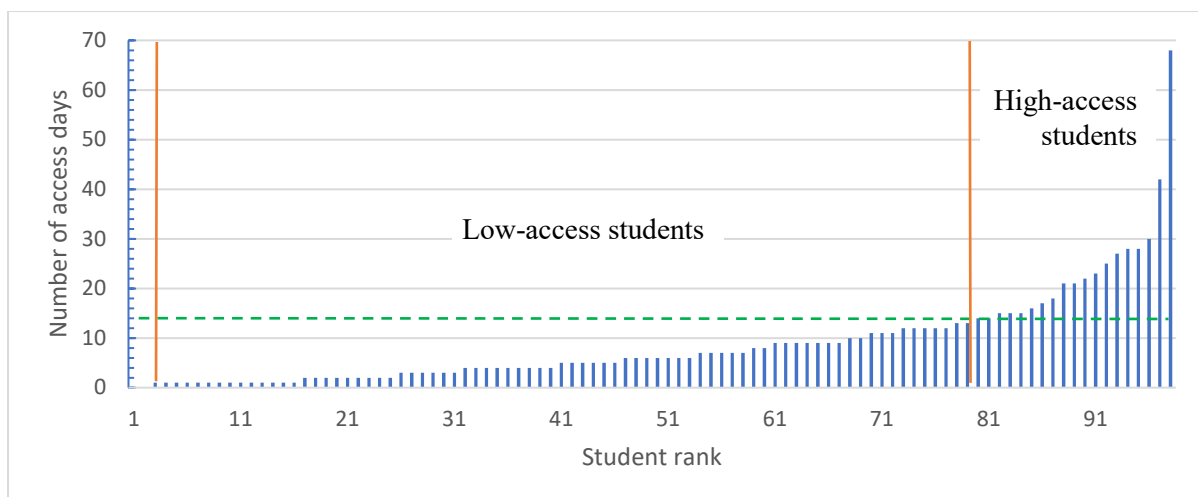
Figure 1. Student access days (N=98)

The discussion forums formed the main part of the course. They were added to provide an environment that is useful for both active students as well as those who prefer just to read (Wegener *et al*., 2002). Table 1 below shows the average number of posts written to the forums and the average number of forum-post views by students in each access group. Data from the self introduction forum, which was the most popular, is also included. It is clear that the level of participation in the discussion forums is quite low. In discussion forums students create the content, and if not enough is written then there is not enough to satisfy the readers.

Table 1. Average number of forum posts and forum views for each student group (n=96)

	Forum posts	Forum views
Low-access group	1	13
High-access group	3	89

4. Factors Affecting Students Accessing the Course

The course closed on the day of the entrance ceremony in early April. During the following Orientation Week all 98 students completed an online survey about the course. One of the questions in the end-of-course survey was "Why did you not access the course more often?" (in Japanese). They could select up to three main reasons from a list which included "I accessed the course enough". The most popular primary reasons are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Primary reasons why students who accessed the course did not access it more often

Student group	#1 1st reason	#2 1st reason	#3 1st reason
High-access (n=21)	I did not know what to do in the Moodle course (6)	I did not have regular access to a computer or device (4)	The contents of the course were not interesting (3)
Low-access (n=75)	I did not know what to do in the Moodle course (24)	I did not have regular access to a computer or device (23)	I studied English somewhere else (9)

It should be noted that although two hours a week was suggested, it may not have been necessary for all students to access the course this much. It is understood that some students were engaged in activities which helped them to maintain their English language skills during this time, however in order for students to take advantage of the other potential benefits it was suggested that they get involved in the course anyway.

Nearly a third of students who accessed the course reported that not knowing what to do was the primary reason for not accessing it more. There are several possible explanations for this. First, while

the authors deemed that the instructions and explanations (in both Japanese and English) were sufficient, they might not have been clear for some students. Secondly, Japanese high school students typically are not used to activities such as forum discussions that do not have a clear ending point. Third, some students might not have had the ICT skills to successfully follow the instructions. Finally, some students might have felt reluctant to engage with an online environment which was out of their comfort zone.

5. Student Opinions of the Course

One of the questions asked students to indicate the three things they liked most about the course. The ten most popular choices are shown below in Figure 2.
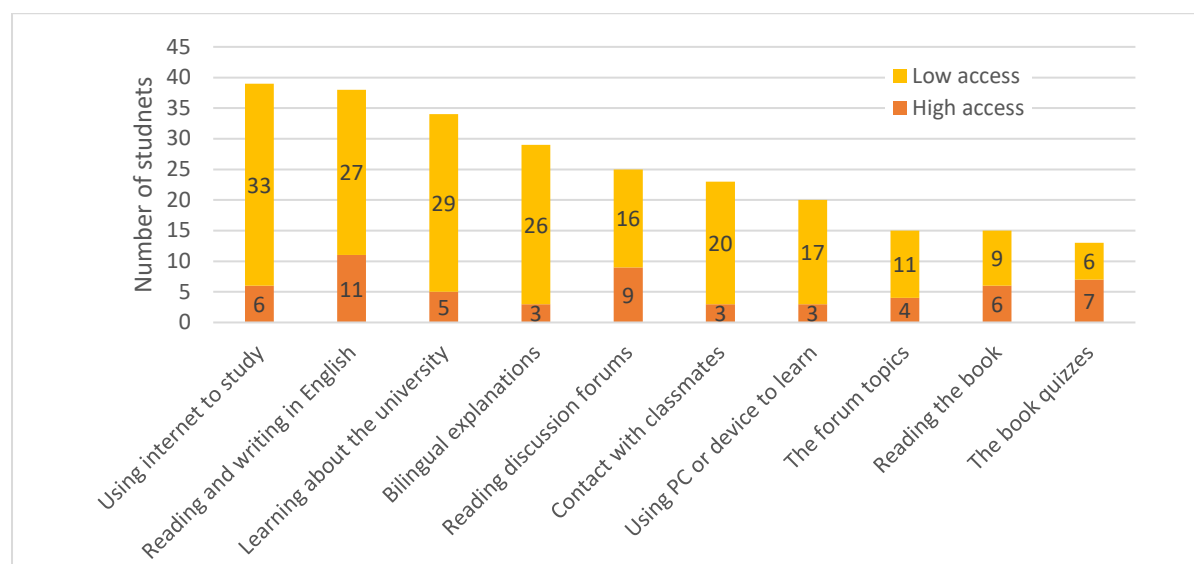

Figure 2. What students liked about the course

In spite of the abovementioned issues, the students as a whole liked e-learning, as well as using English. In addition, the high-access students especially liked the English language aspects of the course, such as reading the forums and the book. In contrast, the low-access students favoured the course's communicative activities, such as learning about the university and having contact with future classmates.

6. Conclusion

The authors have created an English course for high school students who have been accepted to university up to five months before the start of the academic year. It is essentially a fully online course, which, although it has some benefits for both students and course administrators, it has a few challenges. Since the course is non-credit-bearing, student participation is solely based on internal motivation.

Students who accessed the course did participate in the core activities, however to a lesser extent than was suggested to them. In order to improve this, the authors are considering reducing the frequency of forums from weekly to fortnightly, and introducing some scaffolding activities at the start of the course to guide the students into an online learning environment. In addition, attention will be given to the format of the course, so that it is easily accessible by mobile device.

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