Implementing the Activity of Copying Text by Hand (CTH) in "English E-Learning": A Case Study at Tokyo Keizai University

Hiroko Miyake, Rie Owaku
Tokyo Keizai University, Japan

Abstract

The English Program at Tokyo Keizai University (Tokyo, Japan) has included the subject "English e-learning" in the curriculum since 2006. Teachers have struggled with new styles of teaching, and during the course, have engaged in deep discussion about more effective teaching methods. One of the ways of teaching which is well known among teachers is for students to copy text displayed on a screen into their notebooks. The activity is not uncommon in the traditional English class, but it is very unfamiliar to teachers who have previously believed they must use only computers in "e-learning" classes. The present survey was conducted to find out how students reacted against the activity of copying text by hand (CHT) in "e-learning" classes.

1. Introduction

English e-learning has been a compulsory subject at Tokyo Keizai University (TKU) since 2006. All the students in the first year have to take the class once a week and do homework assignments at home to obtain credits. In the face-to-face class, students are required to use a computer and study English using both NetAcademy2 and the Moodle; the former is a multimedia learning system that can be used through the internet, and the latter is an open source learning management system.

NetAcademy2 offers a variety of English courses such as reading, listening, vocabulary and grammar, and learners can choose materials according to their English proficiency levels. The Moodle enables students and teachers to communicate within a collaborative virtual learning environment where course materials can be easily managed and accessed. Currently on the Moodle, teachers at TKU are sharing quizzes on what students are supposed to study through NetAcademy2, and they can carefully check for students' understanding by conducting the quizzes in/outside the classroom.

Every year, for a couple of weeks of the first semester, the sight students fully enjoy learning English through NetAcademy2 and the Moodle (henceforth, "English e-learning"), because most of them have never experienced such English e-learning before. Their satisfaction seems extremely high, and many teachers see bright future prospects. After a while, however, some of the students start complaining about English e-learning; they tend to say that there is no writing activity and they want to study English words, phrases, and sentences by writing on paper, not just by typing and clicking on a screen.

The authors focused particularly on such students' complaints and implemented continuous activities of copying text by hand (henceforth, CTH) in/outside the classroom as one of our ways to meet their needs. Thus, the present study will show whether students' reactions against English e-learning changed through CTH, and whether the activity was truly effective for English learning.

2. Purpose of the present study

CTH is probably one of the most widely used learning strategies (Porte, 1995) [1]. The effectiveness of it in language learning has been the focus of some research. Uda (2008) [2] insisted that copying English text can improve English writing ability, and also Uda & Sasaki (2010) [3] stated that the activity is helpful for increasing skills of English communication and cultivating basic learning attitudes. Moreover, Suzuki et al. (2010) [4] proved that copying English is effective in helping students learn English vocabulary.

Through the observations of students' CTH, the authors found that students sometimes perform CTH incorrectly. Porte [1] pointed out the students with low English proficiency tended to make many mistakes in CTH.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, no study has comprehensively examined the students' reactions against CTH in an "e-learning" class. Also, according to Oku (2008) [5], there are few cases where teachers introduce such handwriting activities in e-learning. The present study attempted to fill in the gap by providing the results of a case study on this issue.

3. Method

In order to see students' reactions to CTH in e-learning classes, both authors made students buy a notebook and bring it to every class for a year. When students read or listened to material of NetAcademy2 displayed on a screen (see Figure 1), the teachers instructed them to copy the text into their notebook. The time for CTH depended on the students' English proficiency levels.
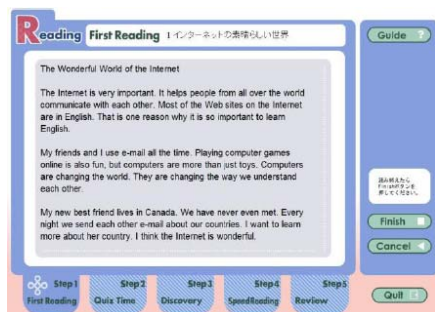
Figure 1. Basic English Course, Reading Unit 1 (from NetAcademy2)

From 2007 to 2011, in the classes that Miyake was in charge of, students were forced to carry out CTH soon after reading the text in Step 1 of the Basic English Course (see Figure 1), measuring WPM (Words Per Minute). During CTH, the teacher urged the students to write the sentences fast and accurately, with reference to Porte (1995) [1].

Students spent around 5-8 minutes on CTH at the beginning of the class. Due to this activity, they easily concentrated on studying English, which had not been seen without CTH.

When completing the English Grammar Course homework assignments, students first read the grammar explanation, then worked through the "Trial Questions" and "Practice Questions" by clicking. After studying the grammar on the screen, they copied all the sentences from the "Practice Questions" into their notebook, and handed it to the teacher in the next class.

Figure 2. English Grammar Course, "Practice Questions" of Level 2-201 (from NetAcademy2)

As CTH without thinking is pointless, the teacher repeatedly had students focus on the basic parts of each sentence such as subject-verb agreement, articles (a, an, the), verb tense, etc. In addition, the teacher advised the students, especially those who were of high English proficiency, to check whether they could translate Japanese into English without looking at the screen.

In an English e-learning class, students are required to take the TOEIC IP test at least once in their first year, since it is a condition for obtaining a credit for the class. Students need to get accustomed to the TOEIC test style therefore, a workbook for the TOEIC was chosen as the material for the CTH in Owaku's classes.

In the first and second classes of the year, the students were instructed to perform CTH, while the teacher checked on them and gave suggestions. The purpose was to have students study CTH methods as a weekly task. First, they performed CTH accurately and correctly. Second, they submitted the task to the teacher, and finally, they checked the teacher's feedback.

From the third class, students answered questions chosen by the teacher, read explanations in the answer book, and then read the questions aloud before performing CTH. When students perform CTH they should understand the pronunciation and the meaning of the questions. They were also expected to memorize some words and short phrases through the read-aloud activity and CTH (Uda & Sasaki, 2010) [3].

When the material was extracted from the Part 7 questions, students were told to copy the layout carefully. Through that process of CTH, the students realized the differences of layout between English and Japanese, which helped them not only answer the TOEIC questions but also to improve their language sense.

To see students' reactions toward CTH in English e-learning, a questionnaire was conducted at the end of the first semester. The respondents were 70 undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language at X. They were instructed to answer the question, "What do you think about CTH in English e-learning classes?"

4. Results: Students' reactions toward CTH

When CTH was first implemented in the classroom, some students looked comfortable but others complained, wondering why they had to "write" even in an English "e-learning" class. However, when the teachers told them that many of the greatest people in Japan who had succeeded in acquiring English had used CTH, the students took a more positive attitude towards CTH. Also, saying "the more English vocabulary you know, the faster and more accurately you will be able to perform CTH compared to others" gave students a higher motivation to use CTH, and they started to compete in the speed of copying the text.

The following represents students' comments on CTH in each author's English e-learning class.

[Students in Miyake class wrote…]
(a) (By CTH,) I could remember the basic elements of what I had learned in high school.

(b) CTH was hard but preferable. I believe only clicking on the screen is not helpful for understanding English.

(c) CTH was very hard but it was also a challenging and satisfying activity.

(d) First, I thought I would be required to use only a computer in this e-learning class, but actually I wasn't, and CTH was fun.

(e) CTH was a pain but thanks to it I think my English ability has improved.

(f) Not only clicking on the screen but also CTH was effective for me. What I wrote in the paper easily stayed in my head.

[Students in Owaku class wrote…]

(a') I want to continue the CTH in the next semester. Since I'm not good at studying voluntarily, the task makes me motivated to study. I could do the CTH in my own way.

(b') I think the CTH, which was given to us as one of the weekly tasks, was very effective. I didn't feel I was learning English just through reading questions and explanations; however, I felt I learned better when I wrote things down by hand. I was also motivated to attend the class because I could get some extra points if I submitted the handwriting notebook.

(c') I was satisfied with CTH. I didn't have many chances to write English except in class. It was also nice to get some extra points if I did CTH as homework.

(d') Though I don't feel there has been an improvement in my English skills through CTH, I like to take notes, so I welcome this kind of homework. Teachers should make some distinction in grades between the students who did their homework properly and the students who didn't do it.

(e') As for CTH, I didn't feel I was studying English. I just copied texts by hand. Instead of copying the long text, it would be more effective for students to write an essay on the social topics.

(f') Partially computer-centered learning should be avoided in a computer room.

As seen above, students' reactions about CTH in English e-learning class were mostly positive. Although students with low English proficiency can often express a desire to avoid hard tasks in class, the students in this study reported that the activity was generally enjoyable, challenging, satisfying, fun, effective, and motivating for many of them. These are the same reactions seen in the traditional language classroom without computers (cf. Uda, 2008 [2]; Uda & Sasaki, 2010 [3]) so it could be said that CTH can contribute to the English "e-learning" classroom.

5. Discussion

It seems to be fun for those who have not experienced English e-learning to study by clicking on the screen. This new method of learning, instead of paper-and-pencil learning, may enable students to gain higher satisfaction from studying English initially. However, it was found that this satisfaction did not persist. Teachers should not believe that English e-learning can maintain students' satisfaction, and should take some steps, including CTH, to avoid lowering of satisfaction levels.

The phenomenon that students could not obtain satisfaction from studying unless they used paper and pencil was also seen in the research of Kodera (2008) [6] and Nakajima (2006) [7]. Their students also left comments such as "Just choosing the answer on the screen seemed not to fix what I've learned in my memory", and "Writing words by hand in the notebook makes it possible to memorize more. Another good point is that I feel like I'm studying harder".

Crookes and Schmidt (1991, pp. 498-502) [8] say that the motivation for learning a language can be judged through assessing the learner's interest and enthusiasm in regard to the learning methods and materials used for language learning. Also, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, p. 2) [9] describe "motivation as being defined by three components: the desire to achieve a goal, the effort extended in this direction, and the satisfaction with the task." The previous section clearly showed that many students were satisfied with copying the text on the computer screen into the notebook even in an English "e-learning" class. Therefore, CTH in English e-learning, in this regard, was a successful activity that improved students' satisfaction, which left the possibility that CTH in English e-learning might lead to students gaining higher motivation and being effective in their English learning.

6. Conclusion

In English e-learning, students are required to study English with a computer. They are highly motivated to study English using NetAcademy2 and the Moodle at first because the learning style is new to them. However, after a few weeks, some of them start to feel dissatisfied with just typing and clicking on the screen when they study. The authors introduced CTH in English e-learning classes, and then gathered the comments from students to assess their reactions to CTH in e-learning. The students seemed to be more comfortable with the activity.
In recent times, not only the English e-learning classrooms in the authors' university but also a large proportion of classrooms in Japan have been equipped with computers. In other words, this is a time when teachers should consider using a way of

teaching which combines features of the traditional language classroom with those of the computer-only classroom. The advantages of computer-only learning are that students can get correct answers sooner and work on many more exercises in shorter periods of time. While, the advantages of learning through CTH are that students can pay more attention to grammar, and memorize words or phrases more easily. Furthermore, depending on the teachers' approach, students can be more creative in writing. If teachers of e-learning classes take these advantages into account, more positive effects can be expected than those seen in both the traditional language classroom and the computer-only classroom.

A lot of previous studies suggest that the effectiveness (such as learning achievement) and outcomes (such as satisfaction) of e-learning are largely equivocal (Hu, et al., 2005, pp. 2-3) [10]. Although the present study showed that the introduction of CTH into English e-learning classes satisfied many students, the improvement in students' language ability through CTH has not yet been measured. The future challenges will be to examine whether CTH can improve students' language skills, and whether the satisfaction level and effectiveness of CTH will vary according to students' language ability. Furthermore, it is also important for teachers to change the teaching techniques they use in e-learning. An appropriate combination of digital and analogue (CTH) methods has great possibilities. There are intriguing merits; students get satisfaction from being able to write as well as click, they become conscious of accuracy, and their learning motivation is maintained. The combination of digital and analogue should be introduced into e-learning classes more widely. Finding better ways of using CTH in English e-learning will be the authors' task in the future.

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