Exploring the Effects of a YouTube-Style Video Making Task in Online English Communication Courses

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Abstract
This study investigated the effects of a YouTube-style video making task in English communication courses with a soft CLIL approach. The primary purpose was to explore its effects for content learning and language learning, and the subsidiary purpose was to examine its feasibility in an online format. Participants were 53 students from four English communication courses at two universities in Japan. As the final project, the students planned and made a video of any genre they could find on YouTube and edited it with an application to produce a video with a detailed English narration. In total, 47 videos including two pair projects and two group projects were produced. The content of the videos and the comments on the accompanying worksheets were analyzed to assess the effectiveness of this task for content learning. In addition, the narration was analyzed linguistically to explore the extent the task enabled the students to demonstrate their productive skills of English and to identify areas which would require further linguistic instruction. The results indicate that making YouTube-style videos is an engaging and beneficial task and can produce a highly positive learning experience even when the course is held online.

Keywords: Video Making Task, English Communication, Online Learning, CLIL, EFL

Introduction

In recent years, video sharing websites have gained popularity across the world. Video sharing websites enable users to upload their own videos as well as enjoy the videos uploaded by others. YouTube (https://www.youtube.com), a leading video sharing platform, has nearly 2.3 billion monthly active users worldwide (Statista, 2021b). Japan, where the current study took place, has the sixth largest estimated number of YouTube users in the world, with over 72.5 million users in 2020 (Statista, 2021a). According to a report by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan (2021), 96.5% of teenagers and 97.2% of people in twenties accessed YouTube on a regular basis in the fiscal year 2020. This indicates that Japanese university students tend to use YouTube regularly and that they are familiar with the types of videos uploaded on YouTube. The usage of YouTube in Japan increased in 2020 partly because people were encouraged to stay home as much as possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the monthly average time spent on viewing videos on video sharing platforms increased by 2 hours and 44 minutes among people between the ages of 18 and 34 in Japan between March and April of 2020 (Nielsen, 2020).

Universities in Japan were also affected by the pandemic. The academic year (AY) in Japan starts in April, and classes usually start in the first week of April. However, the start of the spring semester was delayed at most universities in AY2020, and classes were required to be moved online. The situation had not improved by the end of the summer vacation, and as a result, online teaching continued in the fall semester although on-campus teaching partially resumed depending on the university. The current study was conducted in four English communication courses at two universities in Japan in the fall semester of AY2020. These courses had been scheduled to be held on campus, and the activities and tasks including the video producing task for this study had been planned accordingly. However, the courses had to be moved online instead, and as such, modifications and adjustments were necessary in order to make the materials more suitable to an online format.

The syllabi and lesson plans of the English communication courses had been developed based on the following three approaches to English language teaching: communicative language teaching (CLT) (e.g., Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2005; Spada, 2007), task-based language teaching (TBLT) (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Long, 2014; Nunan, 2006), and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) (e.g., Ball, Kelly, & Clegg, 2015; Coyle, 1999; Coyle, Holmes, King, 2009; Mehisto, Marsh, Frigols; 2008). As Savignon (2005) observed, the core feature of CLT is to have students engage in communication in order to have them "develop their communicative competence" (p. 635). It has also been an approach encouraged and emphasized in English classes in Japan including junior high schools and senior high schools (Abe, 2013, p. 46). Therefore, CLT was an underlying principle in planning the English communication courses. Tasks were important components of the courses as well. Tasks, according to Nunan (2006), "involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form" (p. 17). Accordingly, TBLT was another approach taken into consideration in developing the lesson plans.

However, the structure and the content of the English communication courses were most influenced by the CLIL approach. Mehisto et al. (2008) defined CLIL as "a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (p. 9). One of the main objectives of the courses was to have students learn about the topics of the contemporary society by using English, and as such, the courses were compatible with the CLIL approach. More specifically, the approach adopted in

the courses was soft CLIL, which had been defined by Ikeda (2013) as the type of CLIL "taught by trained CLIL language teachers to help learners develop their target language competency as a primary aim and their subject/theme/topic knowledge as a secondary aim" (p. 32). It was this language-led CLIL which was behind the video-producing task of the current study as well.

Video-producing tasks have been integrated into English language classrooms (e.g., Aksel & Gürman-Kahraman, 2014; Gromik, 2006; Miller, 2007; Nikitina, 2010; Shrosbree, 2008). Hamilton (2010), for instance, investigated the effects of an instructional video producing task by having Japanese university students produce structured instructional videos in groups after watching similar videos online. He observed that the task proved to be "effective in terms of motivation, and both productive and receptive use of English" (p. 29). Similarly, H. C. Huang (2015) implemented a video producing project in an English course in Taiwan with 43 students. The study investigated its effects on language learning and learning motivation through pre- and post-tests, questionnaires, reflection sheets, peer evaluation, and interviews. The students chose their own topic and had opportunities to read and watch relevant materials online and produce voice blogs before engaging in the video producing task. The study showed that the project enabled students to learn and use English in an authentic context and helped to improve their learning motivation as well as English language skills.

Yeh, Heng, and Tseng (2020) analyzed whether multimodal video producing tasks helped to improve English writing skills of English learners. They had 57 university students in Taiwan develop videos about Taiwan in groups based on the information and resources collected online. The comparison of pre- and post- writing test results indicated that the students' writing skills improved significantly, especially in "word usage, text structure, and content" (p. 8). The learning gain of the project was also expressed in the reflective essays written by the students. H. W. Huang (2021) was another recent study on video producing tasks, aiming to investigate their effects on students' speaking skills in English. Based on the topics in the textbook, 65 university students from China produced vlogs (video blogs) collaboratively with their classmates in groups by using their smartphones, incorporating their experience in daily life. By analyzing the effects of the tasks through speaking tests, questionnaires, reflection papers, and interviews, her study revealed that collaborative video development tasks had positive effects on the improvement of speaking proficiency, digital skills, and communication skills because the students had actively engaged in the tasks with their peers.

These studies have overall illustrated a positive impact of video producing tasks on the development of students' English language skills and on the enhancement of their learning motivation. However, most studies have investigated the effects of the tasks through tests, questionnaires, reflection papers, or interviews and not many studies conducted from the perspective of English education have analyzed the content and language of the produced videos themselves in detail. The analysis of the videos is likely to be important especially for evaluating the effects of the task in courses with a soft CLIL approach. In addition, the topics of the videos tended to be limited to academic or cultural topics and the potential of YouTube-style videos, that is, videos with a wide range of topics and presentation styles, has not been fully explored. Video producing tasks in the literature were mostly conducted in the classroom setting. As published studies exploring the possibilities and challenges of English classes during the pandemic (e.g., Hijazi & AlNatour, 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020) were still limited, it also remained to be seen whether this type of task was feasible in a fully online format under the present situation.

The current study investigates the effectiveness of a YouTube-style video making task in English communication courses based on a soft CLIL approach. The main purpose of the study was to explore the effects of a YouTube-style video making task for language learning and content learning. The subsidiary purpose was to examine its feasibility in an online format.

Methodology

Participants

Fifty-three students from two universities in Japan (University A and University B) took part in this study. Participants from University A were 23 students from two English communication courses: 16 first year students (English level: upper intermediate) and seven second year students (advanced). Participants from University B were 30 students from two English courses related to speaking and communication: 18 second year students (intermediate and upper intermediate) and 12 third year students (upper intermediate and advanced). All the four courses were taught by the researcher herself as the instructor. The medium of instruction was English. The courses were held entirely online throughout the semester (90 minutes per week, 15 weeks), half synchronously and half asynchronously. In other words, the classes met real-time online on a video conferencing platform and the students worked on the materials provided by the instructor in an "on-demand" style on the respective university's learning management system every other week. This format had been selected based on the preference by the students.

Materials

The video making task for the present study was conducted as the final project of the courses. As pre-tasks, the participants spent at least two weeks on topics on media studies or online communities partly based on the textbook used in each course which included reading, listening, short writing, and discussion. They also had opportunities to watch YouTube videos of different genres as materials for listening and discussion and were encouraged to watch YouTube videos in English outside of the class as well. For the final project, two handouts were prepared: an instruction sheet and a worksheet. On the instruction sheet, a detailed instruction of the final project was given along with the grading criteria. The worksheet contained questions which asked students to reflect on the project. It had the following five questions: What is your video about? What is special about your video? What did you like about this project? What was the most difficult thing about this project? Any other comments?

Procedure

The details of the final project were announced to the classes on the tenth week of the semester so that the participants would have approximately one and a half months to work on the project. The task was announced this early in order to have them start working on it before they became busy with the final assignments for other courses. They were asked to follow these steps to complete the task:
Step 1: Choose your category and topic
Step 2: Plan your video
Step 3: Shoot the video
Step 4: Edit the video
Step 5: Upload the video and the worksheet to OneDrive

The category and topic of the video could be anything that the participants thought they could find on YouTube. They could produce the video individually, in pairs, or in groups of three although working in pairs or in groups was not encouraged because of the pandemic. The length of the video had to be at least three minutes for solo projects, four minutes for pair projects, and five minutes for group projects. On the final day of the course, the participants viewed the videos produced by their classmates in their respective classes. They then commented on each other's video and voted on the best video at the end. The instructor provided further feedback after the class on the learning management system. Note that Japan was not under the state of emergency when this project was conducted. All the participants consented to have their videos analyzed and reported for academic purposes.

Results and Analysis

In total, 47 videos were produced: 43 solo projects, two pair projects, and two group projects. The total length of the videos was 178 minutes 32 seconds and the average length was 3 minutes 48 seconds. The worksheet contained comments from the participants based on their reflection of the project (see above for the questions). As the courses were based on a soft-CLIL approach, the data were analyzed from the two perspectives of content and language.

Content

The content of the videos was analyzed from the following perspectives: genres, frequently observed features, additional features, and recurring themes in the comments on the worksheet.

Genres and Examples

First of all, the videos were categorized by the researcher based on their content. Categorization was loosely based on the video categories of YouTube. However, categories such as recommendations were added to better reflect the content of the videos produced by the participants. As summarized in Table 1, the videos could be classified into six main categories: travel vlogs, lifestyle vlogs, recommendations, education videos, instructional videos, and product reviews.

The most popular genre was travel vlogs. There were 14 travel vlogs (29.8%), recording and reporting the footage of the trips to cities across Japan including Kobe, Kyoto, Fukuoka, Naha, and Tokyo. Lifestyle vlogs were the second most popular genre, and this included videos on the daily routine, hobbies, and daily activities. GRWM (get ready with me) videos, which had been popular on YouTube, were also classified as lifestyle vlogs. There were 11 lifestyle vlogs (23.4%) in total. The third most popular genre was recommendations, that is, videos describing and recommending the student's favorite places, cafés, books, or musicians. There were 10 videos (21.3%) classified under this category. Education videos included topics such as SDGs, learning strategies, and popular culture. There were 7 education videos (14.9%) in the data. There were two videos on cooking, one video on special effects make-up, and one video on drawing (4 in total, 8.5%). These videos were instructional, or how to videos, describing the process step by step. There was one product review (2.1%), reviewing a new wireless speaker.

Table 1: Videos classified by genre

Travel vlogs	14 videos (29.8%)
Lifestyle vlogs	11 videos (23.4%)
Recommendations	10 videos (21.3%)
Education videos	7 videos (14.9%)
Instructional videos	4 videos (8.5%)
Product reviews	1 video (2.1%)

Figure 1 to Figure 6 are screenshots of the videos produced by the students. Excerpts of the comments provided by the students who made the videos are also described below. Figure 1 shows screenshots of a travel vlog. The title of the video was "Fukuoka Trip," and the student described the highlights of her two-day trip to Fukuoka. She wrote on the worksheet, "I want to make my own vlog[s] someday […]. I can enjoy shooting and editing. Not only for the class, but also it becomes personal memories." She also wrote, "The most difficult thing was to add narration. Pronunciation, timing, grammar, everything was hard for me."

Figure 1: Travel vlog

Figure 2 illustrates screenshots of a lifestyle vlog. This video was titled "Christmas: Decorate with Me" and the student showed how she decorated her house for Christmas with the theme of the movie "Home Alone" released in 1990. She wrote, "I did my best to match music, movie, and recording," and that the challenging points were to think about the structure of the video and to write a script for it. She also wrote, "This assignment was an amazing experience for me!"

Figure 2: Lifestyle vlog

The next figure shows screenshots of a recommendation video titled “My Favorite Rock Band” (Figure 3). In the video, the student introduced his favorite band ONE OK ROCK and recommended three songs performed by the band. He wrote, “I wasn’t able to say the lines smoothly, so it [was] difficult to re-record the post recording many times,” but “I’m glad I was able to create a cohesive video.”

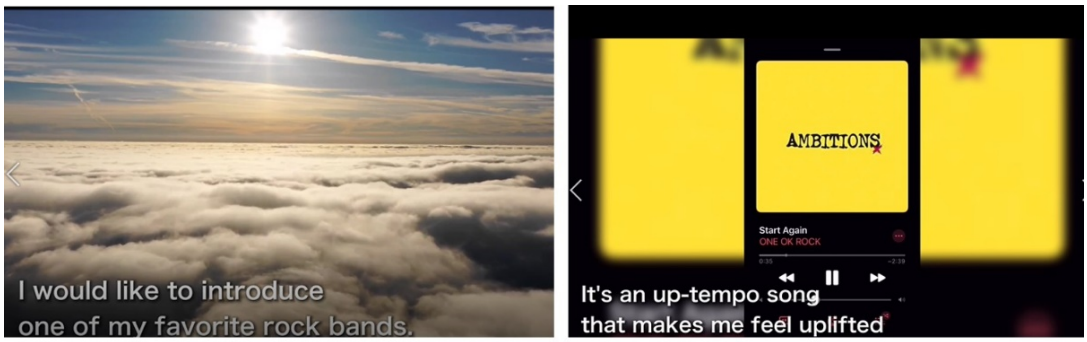

Figure 3: Recommendation

Figure 4 provides screenshots of an education video whose title was “Coffee.” The student talked about the production of coffee, types of coffee beans, and different ways to drink coffee. He wrote, “I edited the video with subtitles and video editing music to make the video easier to watch,” and “I was able to learn things I didn’t even know by making this video.”

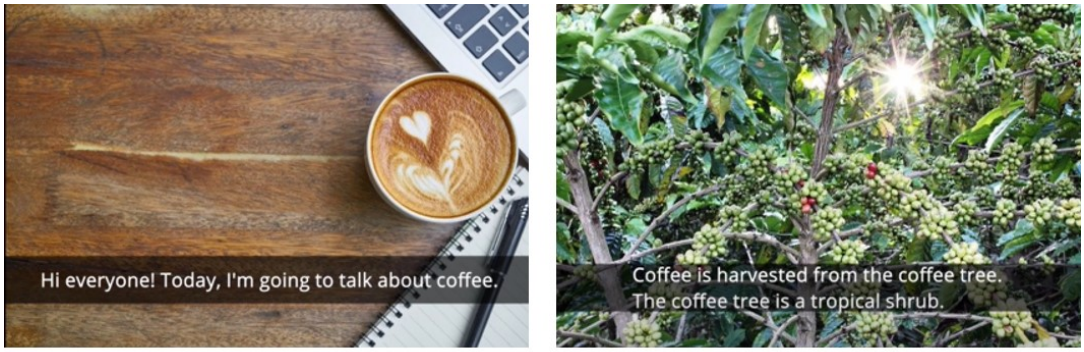

Figure 4: Education video

The next figure illustrates screenshots of an instructional video (Figure 5). The title of the video was “How to Make Bûche de Noël,” and the student demonstrated how to make this chocolate cake for Christmas step by step. She mentioned that she made the sponge three times to “get a good shot” and took the video “from two different perspectives.” She also wrote that she was able to provide “concise instructions on how to make the product.”

Figure 5: Instructional video

Finally, Figure 6 shows screenshots of a product review whose title was “New Wireless Speaker.” The name of the product in Figure 6 is hidden due to copyright reasons. In the video, the student introduced the wireless speaker he had bought and reviewed it while demonstrating how it worked. He wrote, “More than I thought, I didn’t have things to talk” but that he enjoyed the project.

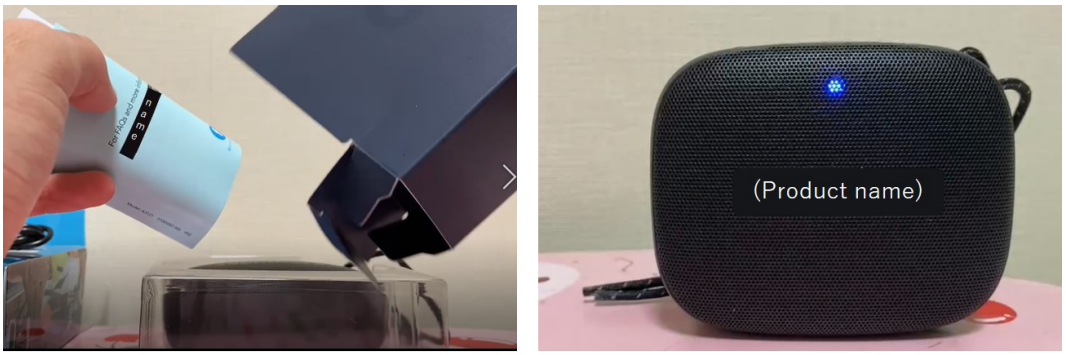

Figure 6: Product review

Frequently Observed Features

There were two features that were frequently observed in the videos regardless of the genre. The first feature was the use of captions (Figure 7) or textual information on the screen (Figure 8). Thirty videos (63.8%) had this feature, and 10 of them had word by word captions. YouTube videos and variety shows on TV often contain on-screen textual information in Japan, and the students who incorporated textual information in their videos are likely to have followed this style. Those who added captions were concentrated in one of the classes. This indicated that the students were communicating with each other while working on the project even though most of them produced videos individually.

Figure 7: Videos with captions

Figure 8: On-screen textual information

The second feature was the use of background music. This feature was observed in 33 videos (70.2%), and four of them contained sound effects on top of background music. The students were able to choose background music suitable for the theme of the video and even changed the music to match each scene. For example, in a travel vlog to Tokyo Disneyland, the student talked about what she enjoyed there with her friends and used different background music for different scenes. Similarly, two students who made a joint lifestyle vlog with the theme of "rainbow" changed the background music when they moved from one place to another. The creative use of background music and sound effects helped to set the tone of the video and made the viewing experience even more enjoyable for the audience. It should be noted that neither the textual information nor the background music had been required in the project.

Additional Features

Another noteworthy feature was that the students edited the videos thoroughly by using various applications. Applications used by the participants included iMovie, Vllo, InShot, Perfect Video, VivaVideo, CapCut, Filmora, PowerDirector, Zoom, and PowerPoint. Only the names are listed here because these applications were not directly used in this paper for analysis. Some of the participants used their computer to edit their video, but the majority of them used their smartphone instead. The instructor had emphasized that the students were not required to edit their video substantially because it was for a language class. However, it was obvious from the final products that the participants had put a lot of effort in editing as well.

One more notable feature was that more than half of the participants decided against showing their face in the video although they knew their classmates very well. There were 17 videos in which the student(s) showed their face. Eight of them were lifestyle vlogs, four were travel vlogs, four were recommendations, and one was an instructional video. There were 11 lifestyle vlogs in total, so this means that those who made a lifestyle vlog tended to show their face in

the video compared to those who chose other genres. One of the reasons for not showing their face could be that more than 90% of the videos were solo projects. In fact, the students showed their face in all the videos produced in a pair or in a group. At the same time, there were four videos in which the student(s) made an appearance but hid their face with a stamp, indicating that some students preferred to stay behind the camera.

Recurring Themes in the Comments

All the participants submitted the worksheet along their video. Their comments were categorized by the researcher into good points and challenging points about the project, and recurring themes were identified as follows. As good points, the participants who made education videos mentioned that they gained knowledge about the topic. Those who made travel vlogs often wrote that they were able to recall the event by making the video. The students who put together recommendations mentioned that the project became a good opportunity to share what they liked with their classmates. Overall, the participants agreed that they enjoyed the process of making a YouTube-style video.

As challenging points, two recurring themes appeared: editing and language. Regarding editing, some participants wrote that it was difficult to match the timing of the narration and background music with their video. Difficult points regarding linguistic aspects included the challenges of preparing scripts in English and speaking English fluently and naturally. Their comments indicated that the participants were able to focus on the content of the video, while also being aware of how they used English in the video.

Language

The linguistic aspect of the videos was analyzed from the following perspectives: high frequency words and vocabulary, expressions, sentence types, grammar, pronunciation, and paralinguistic features.

High Frequency Words and Vocabulary

First of all, all the audio data were transcribed by the researcher, and by using AntConc (Anthony, 2020) with Someya Lemma List (no hypens), tokens, types, and word frequency were calculated. In total, there were 15689 tokens and 2631 types in the data. The videos varied in length from 2 minutes 18 seconds to 9 minutes 2 seconds, but the average number of tokens per video was 333.8 and the average number of types was 158.4. The average TTR was 0.475 (Max: 0.643, min: 0.383). As over 85% of the participants had scripted their narration, the data can be mostly considered as scripted spoken language.

Table 2 illustrates the high frequency words in the data, color coded by their word class. This table only shows the 50 most high frequent words for reference, but descriptive adverbs and adjectives did not appear in the list. In addition, words higher in level were not frequently observed except for technical terminology.

Table 2: High frequency words (lemmatized)

1	be (900)	11	you (220)	21	there (89)	31	very (61)	41	as (49)
2	the (613)	12	we (158)	22	about (86)	32	by (59)		like (49, verb)
3	I (576)	13	so (157, conj)	23	but (84)	33	first (58)	43	movie (48)
4	and (438)	14	have (151)	24	on (77)		one (58)		next (48)
5	to (381)	15	my (145)	25	not (76)		when (58)		see (48)
6	a (329)	16	for (129)	26	at (71)	36	do (56)		so (48, adverb)
7	of (309)	17	that (111)	27	he (66)	37	also (55)	47	because (47)
8	this (307)	18	go (109)	28	song (65)	38	from (53)		she (47)
9	it (281)	19	with (94)	29	will (63)		time (53)	49	their (46)
10	in (274)	20	can (93)	30	make (62)	40	get (51)	50	watch, want (45)

Note. The color represents the main word class of each word. sky blue: verbs, light green: nouns and pronouns, deep blue: adverbs, gray: conjunctions, yellow: auxiliary verbs, orange: others including determiners and prepositions

Looking at the high frequency words and vocabulary by genre, the data showed that the participants were able to choose appropriate words for each genre. For example, in case of travel vlogs, they used various nouns to indicate places (e.g., area, street, garden, shop, café, museum, market), and in case of education videos, they used various verbs to describe their topic (e.g., evolve, emerge, emit, combine, submerge, increase). However, even when analyzed by genre, the variety of adjectives and adverbs (e.g., favorite, scary, beautiful, delicious, various) was still limited.

Expressions and Sentence Types

In terms of expressions, the participants were able to use expressions that described the scene concisely, properly, and effectively. For example, in instructional videos, they were able to describe the process clearly step by step (e.g., “Then, continue to fry for one minute.”). In lifestyle vlogs, the students made use of expressions to describe each scene without relying too much on visual information (e.g., “My eyebrow pencil is broken. I am shocked.”),

The students did not rely overtly on simple sentences and used compound and complex sentences sufficienty. For example, in a lifestyle vlog, the student said, “It was born from Niji project, and the group name derives from ‘rainbow’” (compound sentence). In a travel vlog, the student said, “After we enjoyed eating canelé, we walked along Kamogawa river to go to next café” (complex sentence).

Grammar

Analyzing the data from the perspective of grammar, a wide range of constructions were observed including participles (e.g., “In autumn, leaves of mountains turn red and yellow, making colorful patterns.”), passive sentences (e.g., “[The] costume and goods used in the drama were displayed in this house.”), interrogatives (e.g., “When you go to a movie theater, what do you take?”), past perfect constructions (e.g., “[The] view from the tower was [more] beautiful than I had expected.”), and second conditionals (e.g., “An enormous rock appears as

if it blocked Takimichi near the waterfall.").

Salient mistakes included missing articles (e.g., "I went to fashionable café."), misuse of countable and uncountable nouns (e.g., "Breads are sold here."), and mistakes in subject-verb agreement (e.g., "She always help me to […]."). However, there were not many conspicuous grammatical mistakes regardless of the students' English levels, and small grammatical mistakes did not interfere with understanding. The instructor had strongly discouraged the use of translation engines. Based on the performance of the students throughout the course, it was most likely that they did write the scripts without the aid of translation engines. As such, the fact that there were not many grammatical mistakes indicated that the students had made thorough preparation before recording the audio.

Pronunciation and Paralinguistic Features

A detailed phonetic analysis was not conducted because it was not the focus of this study. Instead, the researcher observed to what extent the audience found the speaker's English comprehensible based on their comments to each other. There was visual aid, but the audience were able to provide relevant questions and comments, indicating that they understood the speakers fairly well. From the perspective of the researcher, the students were able to speak clearly and intelligibly in a moderately energetic manner. Some features of Japanese English such as replacing the voiced interdental fricative with the voiced dental stop were heard but did not affect comprehensibility. There were individual differences, but overall, the participants successfully spoke English naturally and fluently. Post-recording seems to have been helpful in achieving this because they could record the audio as many times as necessary until they were satisfied with the outcome.

As mentioned above, less than half of the participants showed their face in the videos. However, those who decided to make an appearance were able to look at the camera straight and talk to the audience with confident facial expressions. They also used gestures adequately. It is likely that those who felt comfortable enough to appear in the video knew or were willing to practice how to present themselves to the audience effectively.

Discussion

This study has shown that the YouTube-style video making task can first promote content learning. In this task, combined with the pre-tasks, the participants gained knowledge about the topics not only from their own videos but also from viewing and commenting on the videos produced by their classmates. Second, the task can promote autonomous learning. The students had to choose their own topic, and partly because of the online format, they had to prepare the videos mostly by themselves. Third, this task can promote language learning. The students were required to "speak as much as possible" during the video, and they had to plan what they were going to say thoroughly especially in case of post-recording. By watching their own video repeatedly, they were able to become aware of their language use.

Fourth, students can gain editing skills through the task. The students voluntarily added music, sound effects, and captions, and by doing so, they were able to learn skills which are necessary in this digital age. Fifth, they can learn to become more aware of the audience. In the task, the participants had to think about the audience when they made the video because they had been informed that they would view the videos together in the class. Finally, they can become aware of their general skills of producing videos in English. Overall, it is a motivational task that can

cover the 4Cs of CLIL: content, communication, cognition, and community (Mehisto et al., 2008) or culture (Coyle, 2009).

On the other hand, there are areas of improvement. Although there were not many grammatical mistakes, it may be necessary to provide more language instruction, especially regarding the integration of "difficult" words as well as descriptive adjective and adverbs. Due to the pandemic, pair and group projects were not encouraged; however, the task is likely to become more effective if students can cooperate with each other more. There are also potential demerits. For example, the task can be time-consuming, and it can be difficult for students with low motivation. The environment of the class also has to be taken into consideration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reported and analyzed a YouTube-style video making task. The study has shown that it is an enjoyable, motivational, and meaningful task for English communication courses with a soft CLIL approach. The task proved to be feasible in an online format, especially in case of classes with students with high motivation.

There are several limitations of this study. First, it was not possible to assess the improvement of English skills quantitatively. There were not enough data on the preparation process, and it was also difficult to compare the learning gain of making videos of different genres. In the near future, a similar study should be conducted in a face-to-face format as pair or group projects with additional language instruction.

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