AN ATTEMPT TO STIMULATE WTC (WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE) UTILIZING MENT.IO AS AN ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARD IN A JAPANESE LANGUAGE CLASS

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Abstract

As part of a project conducted in a beginning-level Japanese language course at a university in the United States, this study explored Ment.io as a practical online discussion board tool capable of stimulating willingness to communicate (WTC) (McCroskey, 1992). The results demonstrated no significant influences on second language (L2) learners of Japanese' WTC, compared to the online discussion board on Canvas. However, the agree/disagree feature and the more convenient and easier to follow flow of conversations helped engage classmates and stimulate their WTC online. Instructors could easily identify the students with the most interactions, which helped shuffle and guide the collaborative discussion of in-person classes for students according to the algorithm of Ment.io. Nevertheless, most comments from Generation Z students—considered digital natives in this target class—were open to new technology, though many comments expressed a familiarity with the format, and that interest in leading topics is essential to increasing WTC online. As such, students' comments and reflections on this study highlighted the importance of understanding the complex relationships among teachers, learners, and technology (Bayne & Ross, 2007).

1 Introduction

In recent years, proposals in Japanese language education have questioned the importance of critical content–based instruction (CCBI) rather than language training for the target acquisition of language knowledge and skills from beginning-level classes (Satō, Takami, Kamiyoshi, & Kumagai, 2018). More broadly, willingness to communicate (WTC) is an important factor in intercultural communication and understanding, and the communication field has actively studied and compared WTC implementation in various countries since the 1980s (McCroskey, 1992). It is a form of social educational communication that practitioners have considered important in second language (L2) learning (Kobayashi, 2006), but most previous WTC studies that include L2 have been conducted in in-person classes, despite the modern world's shift to hybrid learning environments. Therefore, this study intends to involve the research of WTC in online discussion boards. Furthermore, at our university Canvas is used as a learning management system (LMS), so online discussions in Japanese classes are generally hosted on Canvas forums. These are useful and adequate, but Ment.io can focus on closed forums for small-group discussion, and the platform actively tries to guide discussion and numerically score responses based on participant reactions, which are assessed as stimulating more active and profound arguments and a next-generation AI-based discussion board (Carlstein, Allon, & Gur, 2021). Therefore, this study attempted to stimulate WTC online by using Ment.io as an online discussion board in a Japanese language class.

2   Study Background

This section introduces prior research in willingness to communicate, Ment.io, and digital natives, as related to this study.

2.1   Willingness to Communicate

WTC is defined as the willingness to initiate communication in a situation in which one is free to communicate. It began as a study in one's first language (McCroskey, 1992). Macintyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) showed that social and affective factors are associated with WTC in a second language, and not only in language proficiency. He further claimed that this creates individual differences in actual communicative behavior.

2.2   Ment.io

Ment.io was founded in 2015 and professes to be a next-generation discussion board for meaningful engagement. It uses the notion of entropy to designate the polarization level of a discussion and show a score for the discussion overall, along with considering its dynamic over time (Ment.io, 2022). Carlstein et al. (2021) assert that this entropy-driven policy could significantly influence the number of engagements in discussion, including a higher potential to increase team engagement in a case study of Ment.io. Furthermore, Allon (2020) claimed that Ment.io forces people to think more deeply about what they post regarding providing clarification, agree/disagree functions, action of reflection, collaboration, and so on.

2.3   Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants

Digital natives are defined as the generation born amid the digital technology era, specifically in the United States during the mid-1980s, and they have come of age along with the internet. They are "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games, and online content. In contrast, digital immigrants were not born into the digital world but adopted the technology (Prensky, 2001). But those terms sound somewhat discriminatory now, and the digital environment includes a wide diversity of individuals in each generation, which complicates any effort to define a generation. Therefore, it may no longer make sense to divide generations according to digital familiarity (Bayne & Ross, 2007).

3   Project Outline

Ment.io was used in the Dialogue (Taiwa) Project. It was a semester-long project in the Japanese course, targeting the intermediate–mid level according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012). Due to the reflection that discussion was not very active on Canvas in the previous academic year, the author decided to use Ment.io to guide WTC among students online by revising the instruction and processes for a hybrid format. Ment.io was introduced to the project because of previous studies, as mentioned in section 2-2 of this paper. This course had thirty-two students in three sections, taught by three Japanese instructors in each section, during the spring semester of 2022. This course met in person the fourth day each week, and the Taiwa Project provided in-person classes and asynchronous online discussion assignments. Students each presented for five minutes, with an additional minute for questions on the last two days of the course, and

then submitted their final reports. The project counted as fifteen percent of the course grade assigned. As described by Hosokawa (1994), Taiwa activity in Japanese pedagogy is advocated as the project for expressing to and acquiring from others what we think. The theme of the project in this course was explained to the students as being able to communicate their thoughts on various topics in Japanese. However, the project was designed to guide them through the process of finding their own questions about various themes, listening to others' opinions, discovering issues, sharing their findings, and becoming aware of how their own ideas and values have transformed, which is part of the original meaning of dialogue. Therefore, the author, who was a coordinator of the course, asked the instructors for their cooperation in leading students in the project. This project was completed with a final report after eight processes during the semester. Hosokawa (2012) instructed the students to write a report in 12,000 characters in Japanese. Because this target course was not advanced level and had time constraints, however, the final report for this course was reduced to 800–1,000 characters. In the process, Ment.io was to be used by the students five times, and all the posts and commenting activities were mandatory. Table 1 details the basic timeline[1].

**Table 1. Dialogue Project Schedule**

Week 1	Read the instructions for the Dialogue (Taiwa) Project before class and have a brainstorming discussion with your classmates. A discussion sheet will be written and turned in by the end of class.
Week 4	Decide on a title and write a motivation statement 1 of about 300 characters in Japanese. Upload it to Canvas (Motivation Statement 1). Below the first motivation statement, include a list of new words that you have yet to learn. The number of new words should be no more than about five. The title should be "OO and I" (e.g., "Japanese Cuisine and I," "Japanese Food and I," "Sports and I," "Philadelphia and I," etc.).
Week 7	Check the feedback from your instructor and fix the mistakes and upload Motivation Statement 2 from Canvas to the Ment.io discussion board. Under Motivation Statement 2, add a list of new vocabulary words you have yet to learn. The number of new words you have yet to learn should be limited to about seven. Finally, upload the Word file (.doc/.docx) for Motivation Statement 2.
Week 8	Read three classmates' second motivation statements and comment on the discussion board from Canvas to the Ment.io discussion board.
Week 10	Reply to classmates' comments on the Ment.io discussion board from Canvas.
Weeks 10-13	Interview someone related to your topic. After the interview, write Motivation Statement 3, adding about 200 characters in Japanese. In the third motivation statement, include whom you interviewed, what you discussed, and when. Also, write why you interviewed that person. Upload the third motivation statement from Canvas to the Ment.io discussion board. Put the list of new words under Motivation Statement. 3. New vocabulary words yet to be learned should be limited to about ten.

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[1] The actual schedule of the dialogue project for the students was written in Japanese.

Week 14	By the day of the in-person Dialogue Project discussion, read your classmates' third motivation statements and comment on their discussion boards from Canvas to Ment.io. Then discuss the motivation statements with your classmates in person.
Week 16	Based on the motivation statement, present your dialogue project, adding any new ideas after talking with your classmates. Include a list of new words you have yet to learn. The number of new words should be limited to about ten. Presentations will be given in class. Each student will have about five minutes to present, and each student will ask one question and share one comment on their classmate's presentation. After the presentation, you need to write your final report, including the PPT slides of your presentation. The final report should include a conclusion and summary of your previous motivation. Then upload the final report to Canvas. The final report should be about 800 characters in Japanese.

4   Student Feedback

A survey at the end of the semester gathered student feedback on this target course. Twenty-seven of the thirty-two students responded. Questions and students' answers relevant to this study were on a five-point Likert scale and selected free writing questionnaires, as follows:
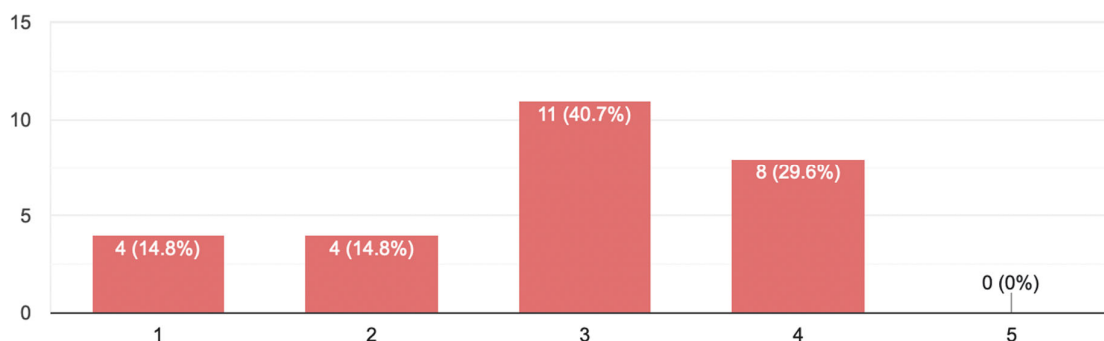
Fig. 1. Response to Q1. Was Taiwa-project helpful to have confidence for your willingness to communicate in Japanese?

Figure 1 shows that no one chose 5 out 5 points on the Likert scale, "more than expected." Eight students chose 4 points, but four chose 1 point, "not very helpful". Selected comments from the students are presented below.
Comments from students who responded, "helpful".
- Discussing topics with classmates was helpful for communication. Also being allowed to conduct an interview in English then report in Japanese was helpful, because in our interviews we could expand more on our topics than if we had to speak Japanese, which allowed us to better translate our thoughts into the essays and presentations.
- The Taiwa project, having to present it to the class, will help me Japanese speaking and improvising ability, which I think will be helpful for making me more confident about my speaking and presenting in Japanese skills.
Comments from students who responded, "not helpful".

- While the concept and idea sounded very fun…, I don't think I have any better way to word just how disappointing and frustrating it was to complete each of the assignments. While I really liked the Ment.io and actual interview portions of the project, everything else seemed very repetitive and often made me question why we were doing it… I guess the idea and concept of the project do not align at all with what we actually do, as it would make more sense to interview MULTIPLE PEOPLE via Ment.io and our personal interviews instead of us repeating the same "I agree" or "I think this is cool" too over and over again in the comments…But overall, I really like the concept/idea, it's just the execution that wasn't the best for me.
- The only suggestion I have is to re-work Taiwa project a bit to make it more interesting for the students. I think keeping the Ment.io and interview portion would be great, but instead of having students just agree to everyone's post, have students post their curiosity questions and have other students in the class answer them to give more responses that can be discussed at the end of the semester (whether that presentation is in video style or in-person).
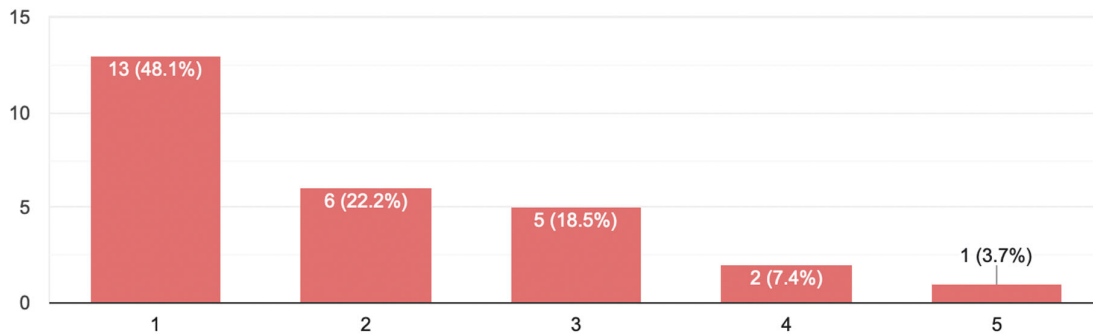
Fig. 2. Response to Q2. Was Ment-io more useful than the discussion board on Canvas?
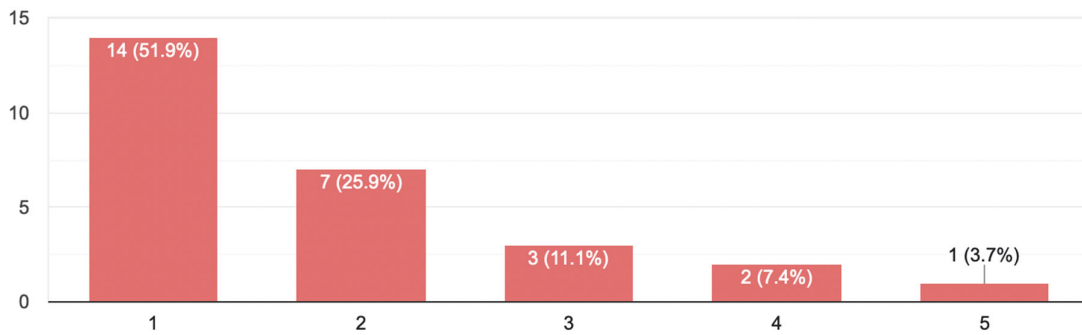
Figure 2 shows that one student chose 5 out 5 points on the Likert scale, "more than expected.". Thirteen students chose 1 out of 5 points, "not very useful". Selected comments from the students are presented below.

Comments from students who responded, "useful".
- The Canvas website, especially discussion boards, are a little clunky and inconvenient to use, so having it all localized onto one site like Ment.io helped the clarity and ease-of-use.
- I think it was easier to see the dialogue between all my classmates than on a discussion board

Comments from students who responded, "not useful".
- … I know we don't use it a lot, but seeing it visually and not really knowing all those functions kinda makes me wonder why we did the change to Ment.io instead of the canvas discussion board.
- I think it functioned pretty much the same, but with added confusion of using a new system. Also, a little bit trickier to navigate than canvas discussion posts.

Fig. 3. Response to Q3. Was Ment-io more helpful for your willingness to communicate online than the discussion board on Canvas?

Figure 3 shows that fourteen students chose 1 out of 5 points on the Likert scale, "not very helpful" and one student chose 5 out of 5 points, "more than expected." Selected comments from the students are presented below.
Comments from students who responded, "helpful".
- Having the site be more convenient and easier-to-use makes me more willing to communicate than using Canvas, so it helped more than expected.
- It was easier to follow the flow of the dialogue.
Comments from students who responded, "not helpful".
- I felt like the way that answers were scored created more pressure while communicating online.
- As stated previously, I think Ment.io and discussion board works the same because they serve the same purpose (discussion posts and replies).
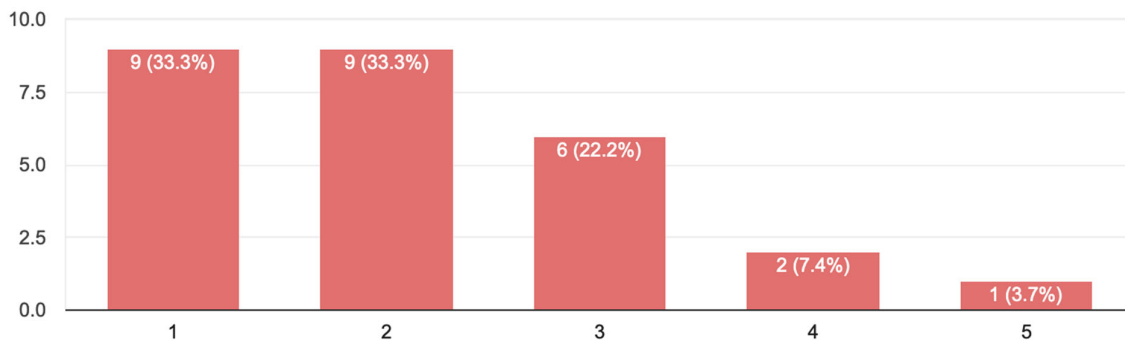
Fig. 4. Response to Q4. Did Ment-io stimulate deep discussion with your classmates?

Figure 4 shows that one of students chose 5 of 5 points on the Likert scale, "more than expected." Night students chose 1 of 5 points, "not very stimulate". Selected comments from the students are presented below.
Comments from students who responded, " more than expected".
- I think the "agree" feature was cool to see engagement with my classmates.
- I bonded with my classmates over our topics from reading the mento-io board.
- I think we engaged in some interesting and deep conversations, but not really as a result of Ment.io, more the assignment prompts.

Comments from students who responded, "not stimulate".
- There were some interesting topics in the project, but I think due to expressing ideas in a foreign language, it was hard to really have deep conversations. I also think that Ment.io didn't play much of a role in whether the conversations were deep or not.
- Communicating with my classmates over Ment.io was less deep than I would have liked, but I do not think that is related to the platform itself. I felt I had better conversations being in person where the conversation could flow in real time.
- I think leaving comments on submissions, while informative, doesn't really stimulate deep discussion as intended, and so thus the only conversation that happened were the comments, rather than a "discussion" type of interaction.

5   Analysis by Ment.io

Ment.io (2022) asserts that it analyzes individual, team, and problem analytics to guide students' improvement and self-analysis and provide instructors with practical AI-based assessments. Figure 5-7 show selected students' discussions on the Ment.io discussion board. The students can see the agreement level and classmates' responses on the discussion, and they can see their discussion quality, team collaboration, team statistics, activity time, cognitive map, and team collaboration on their personal analytics page (Figure5-7)[2]. The reliability of the algorithm for the Japanese language, however, is unclear. Also, we provided each discussion board with three sections in the course, so the analysis by Ment.io was not used in evaluating this course. Still, the author referred to team collaboration as managing discussion partners and group in-person classes.
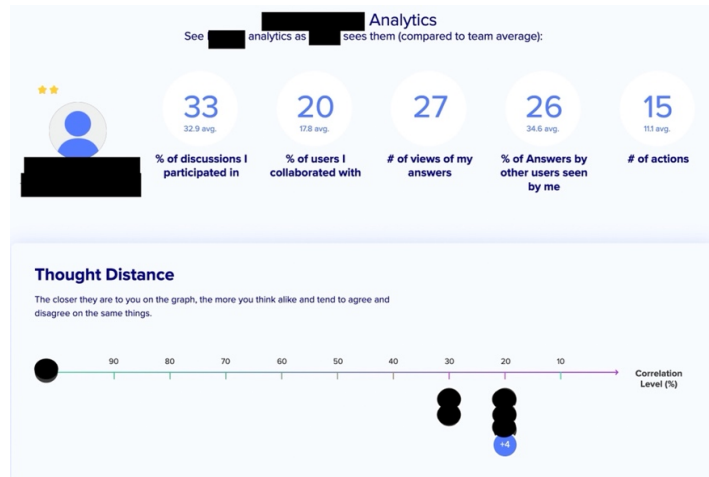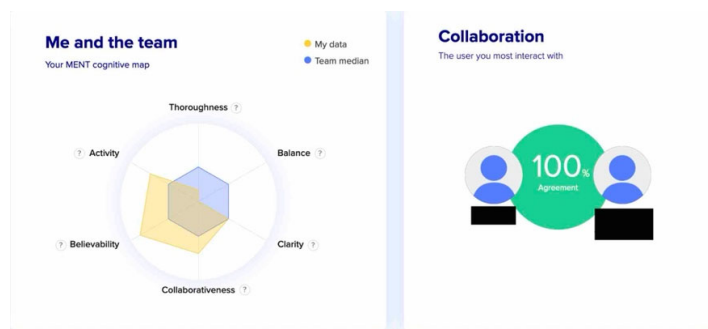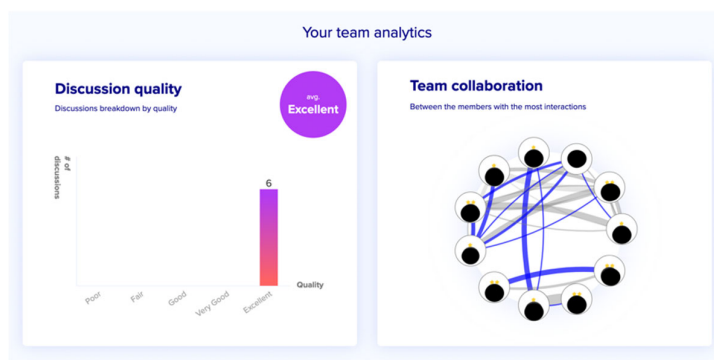

Fig. 5. A student's analytics page 1

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[2] Parts of that figures have been blacked out to protect privacy.

Fig. 6. A student's analytics page 2

Fig. 7. A student's analytics page 3

6   Discussion and Conclusion

Twelve students out of Thirty-two clarified or commented to their classmates more than times mandatory in this project. This result was not seen in previous classes conducted using the Canvas discussion board. According to students' feedback, easy to follow the flow in each conversation on Ment.io is considered to support their actions to comment more than functions of agree or disagree button and caprification functions. However, students' feedback did not significantly influence Japanese language learners' WTC in this target class to compare the online discussion board on Canvas in this project. One possible reason for this result may have been influenced by how the repetitive types of this assignment was presented, in which students felt forced to post and comment on Ment.io. Kobayashi (2006) argues that to elicit learners' WTC, it is necessary to focus on learners' desire to speak and their interests and concerns rather than only setting up activities such as role plays and project work. The author was attempting to stimulate WTC utilizing Ment.io from students at this time. However, it needed to pursue the appropriate pedagogy to lead WTC from students on the new discussion board, which is Tohsaku and Lee (2019) asserted that the application of technology should be utilized to increase learning effectiveness depending on pedagogy. In examining its reasons, the author did not consider enough that even generation Z students, who are digital natives in this target class, showed that the familiar format is essential in online. The fact that WTC is affected by communication apprehension (MacIntyre, 1994), choosing the new online discussion board to be forced to utilize as a tool for projects assignment for students, some of the students made anxiety. Moreover, the connection of communicative behavior is not unidirectional but cyclical

(Yashima, 2004). Therefore, there needed to be more thoughtful assignments to guide the WTC online, the design of a communicative project format, and an appropriate role as a facilitator for instructors in this project. As such, students' comments and reflections on this study showed how vital understanding the complex relationships between teacher, learner, and technology is (Bayne & Ross, 2007). In the further study, through this study's reflection, the author would like to explore areas for improvement to enhance WTC online and build on our practice and research on hybrid L2 education, which is expected to be increasingly in demand in the future.

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