

Japanese University Students’ Experiences from Participating in an Unsupervised Google Classroom Debate Forum

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Abstract

A question of interest to language teachers who plan on utilizing an online debate forum as a research or teaching tool is “What do students who have participated in an online debate forum think of the activity?” This paper describes a study that focused on an online debate forum accessed through Google Classroom and reports the experiences of Japanese learners of English who used this unsupervised platform to practice their debate skills. The paper also reports improvements to the activity suggested by the participants for future studies.

For some students, the ability to debate constructively in a conversation is necessary when arguing with their peers inside and outside the classroom. Although this situation is very prevalent, there is often much nervousness and lack of confidence involved. This may manifest when students are asked to properly challenge their peers’ stance or support their own stance. Students do learn about the grammar involved in stance-support statements when they practice their expository writing, but there is often a lack of routine practice of debate when they must interact with their peers using such statements. Being able to properly support and challenge statements in a conversation is an important first step to developing a potential

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relationship with a classmate. If learners are to develop confidence in these oftentimes unavoidable situations, they need to learn debate skills. Given the volume of online interaction among young people nowadays, and the increasing importance of computer-mediated language use by foreign language learners, online platforms have emerged as a viable form of English debate practice, particularly for useful group communication among classmates. Online platforms may also be referred to as “social media platforms,” which may be defined as an internet-based site and service that promotes social interactions between participants (Page, Barton, Unger, & Zappavigna, 2014). Although video and audio interaction modes are also offered by a number of these online platforms, and use of them varies from culture to culture and from individual to individual, they may be seen primarily as a text-based medium or a text and visual content medium.

A research study involving Japanese ESL students' computer-mediated communication compared face-to-face debate to electronic debate and reported a tendency for students to have an increased rate of participation in electronic debate (Warschauer, 1995). A previous study in computer-assisted classroom debate, which showed the tendency for students to ask many more questions of other students than of the teacher when using that platform (Chun, 1994), may suggest that an online-debate forum is a practical method to motivate students to interact with their peers without the need for extensive teacher supervision. One such online platform is Google Classroom. Based on the success of prior research on small group collaborative activities (Zha, Kelly, Park, & Fitzgerald, 2006), I designed the online debate forum to promote debate-based communication in order to increase students' use of English in social situations. With the goal of understanding student perspectives towards a Google Classroom debate forum, students' experiences participating in an online debate were surveyed with a post-task questionnaire and their answers were analyzed.

Research Design

This section presents the research questions for this study and provides the details of the research design and methods used.

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Purposes of the Study

The current study investigates how students responded to participation in an unsupervised debate forum platform, and seeks to determine whether or not they view this activity as actual debate and to what extent they feel it affected their ability to make stance-support statements.

Research Questions

In regard to the purposes of this paper, the following research questions were proposed:

- 1) Do students see the unsupervised debate forum as closer to actual debate than homework?
- 2) Do students perceive an improvement in their ability to express their own opinion after participating in an unsupervised online debate?
- 3) What feedback do students provide on the good points, bad points, and areas of possible improvement for the online debate forum?

Method

The study focused upon the analysis of feedback provided by Japanese university students after an unsupervised online debate forum. The debate forum was designed to be operated parallel with related course material that centered around presentation and debate in English. A post-debate questionnaire was conducted that allowed students to provide feedback on this activity. Data were later anonymized to remove all personally identifying information.

Participants and Data

First year Department of English students of a Japanese university were selected as participants for the study. There were fifty participants in total who provided data by responding to a questionnaire following the study. Two whole classes, consisting of fifty students in total, voluntarily participated in the study and were given the option to opt out at any time. The forums were set up by the two teachers of the classes and, aligning with the procedures of this study, they did not control the content of the students' writing in the forum. Students had already been classmates for a total of about fifty hours, and the language they used reflected their relationships

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as classmates or friends. Students used their own names or easily identifiable nicknames while participating in the online forum.

Procedure

The study consisted of a four-step process that was conducted over a total period of two months. Each step is described in detail in this section.

Step one was the preparation for the debate forum, which was done during class time, and included students surveying their classmates' opinions regarding each other's statements. Students were also required to present the opinions they collected, along with any pros and cons of those opinions, to the rest of the class. Google Classroom spaces were created by the teachers, and twenty-five students from each of the two classes joined their respective spaces. Students decided on topic statements and these were collected by the teacher. The teacher divided the total number of student topic statements by the number of weeks in the semester (e.g., 50 topics/15 weeks = 3.33, practically three or four topics per week). All of the topics were created by the students. The teacher posted the students' topics for them in order to maintain a consistent number (three or four) of new topics on the debate forum each week. Students could have taken the responsibility of posting their topics themselves, but if multiple students forgot to post their topics, this could have led to extended periods of time on the debate forum with no new topics being posted. The format for posting student's topics is as follows: (Student's name)'s topic statement: "Smoking should be banned on campus."

Step two was the initiation of the debate forum. Students were informed of how many topics would be posted by the teacher each week starting on the first day. Students were asked to make at least five responses to each other's statements and comments. A schedule was provided for the students as to what topics would be posted for which week.

Step three was the maintenance of the forum until the end of the debate. This was done at the beginning of each week (one class a week). Teachers announced the topics that have been or will be posted. Students could have a brief debate of the posts made from the previous week. Teachers then reminded students to open up Google Classroom each day and check on their phone or on their computer. After this, teachers briefly reminded students to make at least five

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contributions per week. If there were any students who do not include the name of the person they are replying to, a teacher reminded the students to do so in each response.

Step four was the post-debate questionnaire (See Appendix B) that allowed students to provide feedback towards this activity. Similar to Ekahitanond's, (2013) Likert five-point attitudinal questionnaire, a five-point design was used for a post-study survey after the Google Classroom debate forum. Students were able to mark values in between whole numbers, resulting in values that included fractions.

Obtaining Informed Consent

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from an ethics committee at the university where the debate forum was conducted. All elements of the debate forum were explained to the students before they were given the option to participate. Those who opted out of the debate forum were given an alternative to the debate forum that provided equivalent education. Students who provided consent were given the option to withdraw their consent and discontinue their participation in the debate forum and eliminate all data collected from them at any time.

Data Analysis: The Experiences of the Participants

In this section, the collected data is presented, analyzed, and discussed in relation to the research questions provided in the last section. Each of the research questions will be discussed in the same order they are listed above.

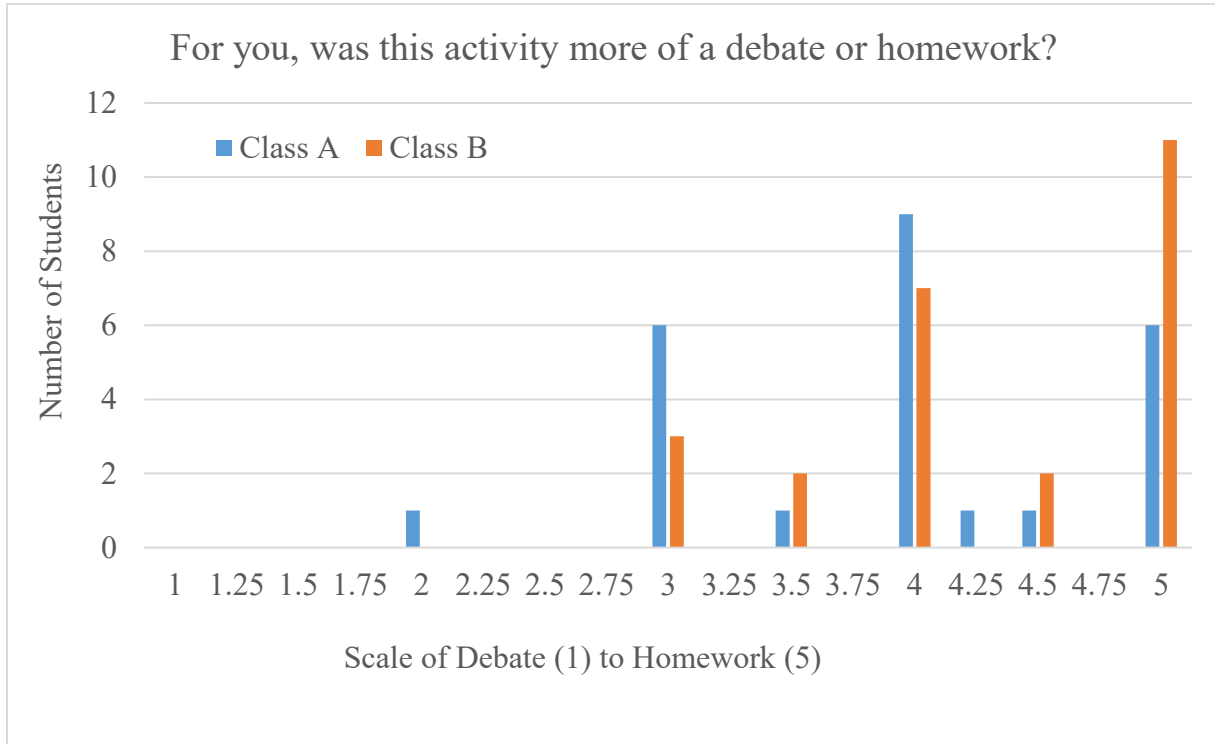
Research Question 1: Do students see the unsupervised debate forum as more of actual debate than homework?

To answer this question, students' attitudes towards the debate forum were assessed via a questionnaire at the end of the study. The questionnaire first asked students to rate, on a five-point scale, whether they saw the debate forum as more of a "debate" or "homework."

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Figure 1

Student Responses to the Question “For You, Was This Activity More of a Debate or Homework?”



Students from Class A and Class B were considered as equivalent populations and the mean was calculated with all students in a single set. With the mean of the classes being 4.13, one can assume that the majority of the students saw the debate forum as more of “homework,” rather than “debate.” Student feedback will be shown later in the paper (Research Question 3) that provides an explanation for this. Perhaps due to this inability to view other participants’ posts until after they have submitted a post themselves, students rarely replied to other’s posts. A look at the sample posts (in Appendix A) shows us that many of the students may have had a lessened “debate” opinion, since the submission method may have appeared more as a homework submission, rather than a contribution to a debate forum where other students are replying to each other’s posts. This also may have led to students contributing only the minimum number of responses since they felt that posting a response was required homework given by the teacher. Although the required nature of the homework had its drawbacks, questionnaires in a

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previous study (Birch & Volkov, 2007) found that the predominant reason for non-participation in course debate forums across language groups in an ESL classroom was “being not required to do so,” which was 38% of the whole class. This may suggest that the required nature of the debate forum may be a necessary component in order to promote a higher frequency of participation.

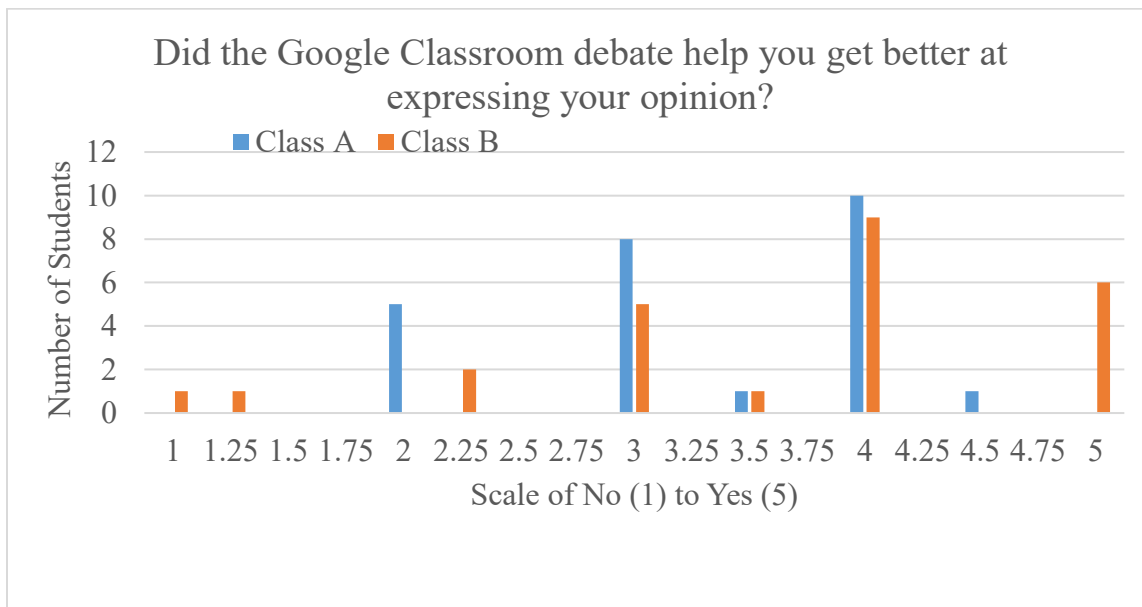
The frequency of students' posts did not change significantly over the course of the experiment, with most individuals posting an average of once per topic. There were very few incidences when students posted more than once, whether it was a direct response to the topic or a reply to their peers.

Research Question 2: Do students perceive an improvement in their ability to express their own opinion after participating in an unsupervised online debate?

The second part of the questionnaire asked students to rate on a five-point scale whether they saw an improvement in their ability to express their opinion after the debate forum.

Figure 2

Student Responses to the Question “Did the Google Classroom Debate Help You Get Better at Expressing Your Opinion?”



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With the mean of the classes being 3.47, one can see that the majority of the students perceived an increase in their ability to express their opinion. The discussion of Research Question 3 will provide an explanation for this. Furthermore, this study did not measure the opinions of students in a regular in-class debate, which could be pursued in future research.

Research Question 3: What feedback do students provide on the good points, bad points, and areas of possible improvement for the online debate forum?

Following the first two parts of the post-debate questionnaire were three questions designed to elicit free feedback about what could be improved in the debate forum. These questions were, 1) What were the good points of Google Classroom? 2) What were the bad points of Google Classroom? 3) Please give your ideas for making an online class debate that is better than this one. The following section presents a table that categorizes all of the feedback given by the participants of the debate forum according to theme similarity. Feedback was sorted into categories shown in the tables below. One piece of feedback can have replies with several ideas and each idea is counted separately. A list of all of the unedited feedback in its original form is also provided in Appendix C along with identifying numbers.

There was a total of 164 comments with individual themes. There were three total comments that were either illegible or out-of-context and were not counted.

Table 1

Summary of Student Comments Regarding the Good Points of Google Classroom

Good points of google classroom comments	Total number of responses
Expression and sharing of opinions	43
English practice	14
Google Classroom platform aspects	10
Posting schedule	5
<i>Total</i>	72

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The most common type of good point, “expression and sharing of opinions”, might indicate that this is an opportunity missing from other classroom tasks. This type of comment by itself made up 60% of the total types of comments provided in this section.

Table 2

Summary of Student Comments Regarding the Bad Points of Google Classroom

Bad points of google classroom comments	Total number of responses
Google Classroom platform aspects	16
Not-like-debate aspects	13
Other's participation problems	11
Homework/hassle	9
English level difficulty	8
<i>Total</i>	<i>57</i>

The top two most common types of comments, which were “Google Classroom platform aspects” and “not-like-debate aspects” included comments that mentioned inherent negatives in the Google classroom platform and elements that made the debate forum feel “less like debate”. There were aspects of the debate forum that did not match previous expectations of “debate”. Together, these two categories made up 51% of the total types of comments in this section.

Table 3

Summary of student comments regarding the areas for improvement

Areas for improvement comments	Total number of responses
Change platform/aspects of platform	14
Change the number of topics/schedule	11
More/clearer instructions	5
Suggestion for different setup/rules	4
<i>Total</i>	<i>34</i>

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The most frequent types of comments provided by the students, which was “change platform/aspects of platform,” gave suggestions to fix problems in the Google Classroom platform as well as provide alternatives to the platform. One common suggestion for an alternative platform was LINE. The second most frequent type of comment, which was “change the number of topics/schedule,” included suggestions to increase or decrease the number of topics provided in a certain time period, as well as suggestions to shorten or lengthen the amount of time provided to debate a set of topics. Together, these two types of comments made up 71% of the total types of comments in this section.

Conclusion

The study set out to investigate Japanese English learners' opinions towards online discussion, focusing specifically on their written feedback. This conclusion will begin by discussing limitations of the study focusing on the use of the Google Classroom platform and the ambivalent homework/free contribution nature of students' contributions. Finally, the findings of this study are explained.

A limitation of the study was the slightly supervised nature of the debate forum. This was due to teachers needing to remind students to post. This may have caused students to feel that the activity was obligatory and therefore “homework.” The debate forum in general was managed to a degree by the teachers. Previous studies (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2005) have found that a prominent instructor's role in an online forum corresponded to lower rates of student participation. Although the online-debate forum was designed to be unsupervised, written reminders were handed out to students throughout the conduction of the debate forum. Advice as to how many posts should be posted may have contributed to the feeling of homework, which may have caused students to lose interest in the debate forum. Although students were only asked to participate and were not required to do so as their participation did not affect their grade in the class, many may have still felt an obligation to participate because of the teacher's weekly encouragement to post in the online-debate forum. Another solution may involve creating more incentives for students to participate. Previous research (Cohen & Miyake, 1986) that involved an “intercultural network” showed that when students were encouraged to use English functionally rather than for its own sake, the students' motivation to use English increased.

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Future research could incorporate more incentives for students to shift their feeling of the debate forum from being “homework” to “debate.”

An inherent limitation present in this study was the fact that Google Classroom does not allow students to view their peer’s contributions to the forum until after the student has posted. This means that students would need to submit a reply to the main topic first, before their peers’ posts would become visible. As other studies have pointed out (Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012), the advantages of integrating social media into the ESL writing classroom include the ability for students to read comments of the entire class and comment directly and individually on their classmates’ contributions in a medium that is familiar and comfortable. In future studies, other platforms such as LINE, which are more familiar to students and allows students to view all of the posts prior to contributing anything, may be a more viable medium for students to practice debate.

The study concludes that the majority of the students saw debate forum as mandatory homework, and felt an increase in their ability to express their opinion after the activity. Based on the most frequent types of feedback provided by students in the post-debate questionnaire, the following improvements to future debate forums are suggested at this stage. Negative points of the debate forum may be addressed by experimenting with different online platforms in order to provide students with a different debate environment for those who viewed certain aspects of the platform as negative or not-like-debate. Areas for improvement may include a completely autonomous debate forum where students can freely decide upon their own posting schedule and the number of posts they want to contribute should be experimented with in order to address a dissatisfaction with topic numbers and post schedule. All of these changes should be made while maintaining the ability for students to express and share their opinions with their classmates, which was viewed as a positive aspect of this study’s debate forum by the majority of students.

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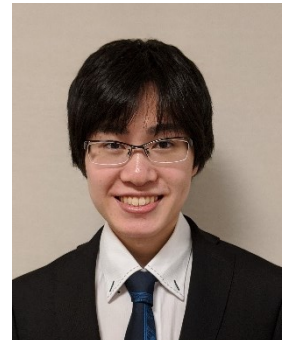
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Appendix A

Examples

The following are examples of the debate with “higher engagement” and “lower engagement” respectively:

Higher engagement

13's statement: We need to pay money to park our bicycles.

9: I'm not sure. I think they park for short time, they don't have to pay.

6: It depends.

9: I disagree. We have only to pay money to park our cars.

20: I'm not sure. I don't think people will follow rules or the environment will improve when they have to pay for parking.

5: I agree. Its natural thing.

2: I agree

11: It depends, because it depends on the places.

12: I agree.

15: It depends. If we have bad manners on bicycle parking, we should make the rule that we need to pay money to park our bicycles.

17: I disagree. If we have free parking area, everyone park this place so city will be good more!

We don't have to think about illegal dumping!

7: disagree

10: I'm not sure.

14: It depends. Because to pay each time is very tiresome.

13: I agree. Because bicycles are different from cars. We ride them in the sidewalks which means it's not assumed as cars.

19: I agree because illegal parking is big problem in Japan.

3: I agree. Because illegal parking is increasing.

5: It depends.

2: I don't agree

18: I disagree. I don't want to pay it.

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4: It depends

6: I disagree. It causes more illegal parking.

Lower engagement

5's statement: We need more beautiful flowers on campus.

9: I'm not sure. I think there are many flowers on campus.

6: I agree. I think the beautiful flowers will help students refresh and relax.

5: me too

11: I agree, because flowers make our campus colorful.

15: I agree. If there are more flowers, our campus will become more beautiful and brightly.

17: I agree. Flowers are really beautiful so we can relax.

8: I agree. Because there are few beautiful flowers on campus.

13: I agree. It gets more glamorous.

3: It depends. Because we already have some flowers.

5: I agree. Because we can be happy.

18: I agree. Appearance is good.

4: I agree. it makes campus more beautiful

6: I disagree.

Appendix B

Post-debate questionnaire

For you, was this activity more of a debate or homework?

Debate

Homework

1	2	3	4	5

Did the Google Classroom debate help you get better at expressing your opinion?

No

Yes

1	2	3	4	5

What were the good points of Google Classroom?

-
-
-

What were the bad points of Google Classroom?

-
-
-

Please give your ideas for making an online class debate that is better than this one.

-
-
-

Appendix C

Student comments from questionnaire

“What were the good points of Google Classroom?”

Expression and sharing of opinions

1. よく考えたら自分の意見を公表できる。
2. 解答を返信してからみんなのアイデアが見れること。
3. 相手の意見など目で見れるので聞きがさがない
4. 自分の考えを表現できる
4. 相手の考え方がわかる
4. 疑問点がみつかる
5. 皆の意見がわかる。
6. 自分の意見が言える。
7. いろいろな人の意見を見ることが出来る
9. We can see other's opinions.
10. I can share some ideas easily.
11. feel free to speak
12. We can share our real opinions.
13. みんなとコミュニケーションをとれた。
14. 話したことない人と話す機会がある
15. みんなのいけんがきけた。
17. I can saw good opinion and bad opinion.
18. みんなの意見が見れる。
19. 自分の意見をはっきりと言える
20. I can expressing my opinion in my class.
21. We can exchange our own opinion.
21. We can communicate with other people.
27. 自分の意見をまとめられるところ。
27. 他の人の意見を見ることができるところ。
29. いろいろな人の意見が一度にみられる。
29. クラスメートの交流！
31. 皆の意見がみれる
32. Discuss with many people
33. I can know my friend's opinions.
36. We can know the other's idea.
38. みんなの意見が分かる
39. コミュニケーション力が身につく
41. 色々な人の意見を聞くことが出来る。
(見ることが出来る)
42. I can also know other's opinion.
42. It is the good time to express my opinion.
42. Easy to say my opinion
44. みんな意見を見ることが出来る。
45. I can exchange opinions everyone
46. I can know everyone ideas at the same time.
46. I can know how everyone think of their problems.
48. みんなが意見を書ける
49. 色々な意見を知れる
50. We can practice to express our opinion, so I can choose suitable work.

English practice

8. 自分で考えて英語をかける

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12. We can motivate each other in our English.

16. 文を作る力がつく

22. 自分の意見を英語で表せることが出来たこと。

28. I can get an opportunity to use English.

33. I can express my opinion in English.

34. 英文をかく力がつく。

35. 英文を自ら考える力が身につく

38. 文法が身につく

38. 新しい単語を覚えることができる

39. 文法の勉強ができる。

41. 文法的なミスしないように注意深く英文を作ることが出来る。

47. Increase our vocabulary.

49. 英語力がつく

Google Classroom platform aspects

2. ケータイを使ってなので返信が簡単に来た。

19. 他の人の意見に流されることはない。

23. We can check my classmate's opinion.

25. 直接じゃなくても話せる

30. スマートフォンでできる

31. クラスメイトと交流しやすい

39. 携帯で友達の見解を知ることができる。

40. スマホでいつでもできる

44. wifi がなくてもできる。

44. 画面が見やすかった。

Posting schedule

3. 自分のペースでできる。

10. I can show my ideas whenever I like.

24. very easy.

31. いつでも討論できる

41. 気軽に出来る。(投稿)

“What were the bad points of Google Classroom?”

Google Classroom platform aspects

2. 自分の解答に対して誰かが反応してくれているかどうか全くわからないこと。

例えば、Kさん質問を返した後 再度見返さないと反応があるかがわからない

→数が多いので1回1回見返すのは不可能。(?) ラインのようにメッセージが来たという返信があれば良いと思った、

7. クラスに入るのにログインなどがあり、なかなか入らなくなる

18. 誰が参加しているか分からないから回答しづらい。

22. みんなの意見が集まらない

23. We can't see other classmate's opinion before I write my opinion.

24. appear same person.

27. 一度出したらやり直しができない所。

29. グーグルクラスルームからのメールの量がすごい。

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- 30. 自分が書いたところがどこか分からない
- 31. 使いづらい
- 38. ページを開くのに時間がかかる。
- 38. 質問とコメントのページが違う。
- 39. ページ開くまでに時間がかかる。
- 44. メールが来ない時があった。
- 44. アプリを入れないと、サイトを開けなかったこと。
- 44. 開くのに時間がかかること。

Not-like-debate aspects

- 6. もう少し議論できるお題がほしい。
- 17. Too many questions.
- 20. Not discussion.
- 26. 同じことがかぶる
- 31. 意見が一方的になりがち?
- 31. 討論の熱がない
- 33. I didn't have much awareness of discussion.
- 38. 答えがかぶる
- 39. 先にやった人の答えをまねする。
- 39. 答えがかぶることがある。
- 41. 投稿数にバラつきがあり、皆の意見が分からなかった。
- 47. Can't face to face
- 48. 全員の意見が見れるのでかたよる。

Other's participation problems

- 3. みんながやらないと楽しくない
- 4. 他人をきずつけてしまう時がある

- 10. Some people didn't submit their ideas, so I couldn't share ideas with all of my classmates.
- 11. Someone didn't mention in the Google Classroom so I couldn't collect enough information.
- 13. 人が多くて大変だった。
- 16. ひとりだけでできない。
- 16. みんなやらないとやろうと思う人がいない (みんなしない)
- 19. 自分の意見を言ったら特に他の人とはなすことなく終わってしまう。
- 21. Take long time to answer the opinion each other.
- 32. Sometimes forgot to do this
- 42. quite busy, so I sometimes forgot to do it.

Homework/hassle

- 1. たまる。宿題感があるので。
- 9. I felt it's a kind of task on the phone.
- 12. We felt like it was a task we must do.
- 15. すこし手間だった。
- 28. It is little interesting.
- 34. 義務感があった。
- 43. めんどくさい
- 45. I little boring
- 50. It is boring little bit.

English level difficulty

- 14. 英語はなせない人が困る
- 25. 伝わりづらい

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- 41. 英語を打たないといけないのが大変であった。
- 41. 文法のミスなどが分からないため、時々困った。
- 42. quite hard
- 42. difficult to type English.
- 49. 分かりにくい。
- 49. イマイチ文法が分からない。

“Please give your ideas for making an online class debate that is better than this one.”

Change of platform/aspects of platform

- 21. 皆の意見が自分が答えてからじゃないと見れないので、常に表示してもらいたい。
- 22. みんなの意見が届くようにする。
- 27. 書き直しができるようにする。
- 27. 意見を書く時に質問が見えるようにする。
- 30. 使いやすくしてほしい
- 31. みんなの意見をもっとみやすくしてほしい
- 34. 1つのコメントに何人も一斉にコメントを書くより LINE みたいな感じで討論できたらより取り組みやすかった
- 38. コメント欄の上に質問内容を表示する
- 39. ページ開く時間ともう少し速くする。
- 39. 自分の答えをうつ時に質問も見えるようにする。

- 41. 統計的にどうなっているのかを見たい時もあったのでデータ化する機能があればいいなと思った。
- 41. 紙に書いたものを投稿（写真などで）できるシステムもあつたら良いと思った。
- 44. 開いたらすぐコメントできるようにしてほしい。
- 49. 回答済のものを分かりやすくしてほしい。

Change the number of topics/schedule

- 2. 私達は各個人のディベートについての内容を30個ほど答える形でしたが、月に2～3回大きな内容を扱えばディスカッションらしくなると思いました。
- 4. 1つ質問でなく、複数の質問をすべきだと思います。
- 6. 一つのお題に対して具体例をふまえて議論するとういと思います。
- 16. 週に1回1つのテーマとかをきめてやる
- 17. I want more a bit question
- 18. もっと課題があれば、みんなが利用してくれると思う。
- 19. 1つのトピックについてもっと長い時間をかけてディスカッションすればいいと思う。
- 24. more easy and fashionable topic.
- 31. 時間をもうけてやってみる。

Classroom Debate Forum

42. I think that we have to discuss only one question.

43. 一つの意見に対して討論する方がよかったと思う (LINE みたいな感じで)

More/clearer instructions

1. わからない

3. 今回全員がやり方を理解してなかったように思う。

9. It didn't have no restriction, I think, so not every one remember to do it including me, It can't collect everyone's opinion.

25. わからない

41. 文法のミスのチェックをしてほしい。

Suggestion for different setup/rules

11. もっと皆が参加するようになればいいと思います。

14. 助け合い

33. I want to feel we do discussion more.

37. ただひたすらに義務になっていた印象がある。それと、クラススコアづけてほしくない。