



# Learners' Interest in Online Engagement: A Needs Analysis

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## Abstract

The recent prevalence of AI tools and online platforms in higher education has digitized how second language (L2) learners approach learning and using English. Not only can L2 learners now access language support online, but they can also share their ideas and voice their opinions across a range of online platforms. With more opportunities to interact online, L2 learners need to be adequately prepared for how to express themselves and engage with others across these platforms. Current research on Japanese higher education learners' online interactions, though, has largely been limited to analyzing discussions on medical forums. Therefore, before constructing a new online forum for English language learners in Japanese higher education to share their voices on a host of opinions and issues, a needs analysis study was conducted to assess what online tools and platforms language learners currently utilize, what they learn from their experiences, and what support they require. An online survey was carried out with 67 first-year university students. A modified version of Chun et al.'s (2016) framework for analysis was used to draw out pertinent findings and proffer pedagogical suggestions. Findings suggest that learners are currently passive in their interactions on public forums. A sizable majority, however, seek to be more engaged in this form of public discourse, but believe they require further language support in order to do so more effectively.

**Keywords:** English language education, higher education, online engagement

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, AI tools and online platforms have digitized how second language (L2) learners approach learning English in higher education. By 2023, more than 70% of Japanese students in higher education were accessing online content to assist with language learning (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies et al., 2023), with the number likely to have risen since. While most learners are seeking assistance with grammatical structures or looking for content to support their research, others are likely interacting with peers across various forums. Unfortunately, little is known about how to prepare learners for online forum interactions, and to date, most research into Japanese L2 learners' interactions on public platforms has

been limited in scope and largely focused on medical forums. Research into online discussion forums (ODFs) dates to the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison et al., 1999), which proposed that a cognitive, social, and teaching presence are necessary for meaningful learning. Findings from recent studies show that ODF use increases motivation to use English further (Pudelek, 2022), enhances cognitive skills (Ononiwu, 2021), and fosters interest in intercultural communication (Matsumoto, 2024). ODFs are particularly effective due to their asynchronous nature, whereby learners can reflect on their interactions before posting (Nandi et al., 2009).

Students in higher education typically learn new ways of expressing, interacting, and understanding online from their peers, outside of the classroom (Chun et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there is a need for specific instruction in higher education classrooms so that L2 learners can articulate their ideas persuasively and deal with interactions in order to become part of the online academic discourse community (Narang, 2024). English language forums for public discourse, such as The World Social Forum (WSF) and European Social Forum (ESF), are well established in Europe (Doerr, 2008). They feature “deliberative talk”, with young activists voicing their ideas in a collaborative environment, allowing them to develop innovative tactics and creative cognitive resources (Doerr, 2008), along with higher-order thinking (Miyashita & Wark, 2024). Studies, such as one by Bailey et al. (2021), have demonstrated the wide range of benefits of utilizing the online language learning context.

Nevertheless, Niu et al. (2021) found that during interactions on the WSF and ESF, L2 learners can face two significant and interrelated challenges: overcoming language obstacles and difficulty in dealing with negativity. Pelzer et al. (2021) identified toxic language towards others as being prominent across a range of online platforms, primarily directed at “women”, “other forum users”, and “ethnicities”. Interestingly, “self-hatred” was also found to be extremely prevalent (23% of users). Dealing with this kind of negativity requires a particular language skill set (Bruni, 2024), which L2 learners can be taught. With the proper forms of support, L2 learners can develop innovative and creative cognitive tactics to better navigate such online interactions (Doerr, 2008).

The necessity for learners in Japanese higher education to receive English language instruction and support for their online interactions cannot be understated. Firstly, it would facilitate progress towards meeting the government’s call for Global *Jinzai* and strengthening progress towards implementing Global Citizenship Education (GCE) (Bosio, 2023). Additionally, the opportunity to raise the English language output of L2 learners in Japan through authentic communication desperately needs to be taken advantage of to address Japan’s low 2024 ranking (92/116 in the world and 16/23 in Asia) in the English Proficiency Index (EPI) (n.d.). A heavy focus on entrance examinations, mastering grammar, and a lack of support for authentic communicative practice have resulted in Japan falling behind most of Asia in terms of English language proficiency (Busso & Sanchez, 2024). To date, there is no directly comparable study exploring how to support L2 learners’ use of public forums in Japan. Existing research in Japan has typically focused on evaluating the effect of using online platforms, such as the lexical and grammatical development of L2 learners through online posting (Koyama et al., 2020; Mizumoto, 2014), the bolstering of cultural competence (Nushi et al., 2022), or the impact of virtual exchange (Roarty et al., 2023).

Before constructing an online forum for English language learners in Japanese higher education to share their voices on a host of opinions and issues, a needs analysis study was conducted to assess which online tools and platforms learners currently utilize, how they interact online, and what forms of support they need if they are to make better use of their interactions. The key research question framing this study is: What online tools and platforms

do Japanese university students utilize in English, and how do they interact? A secondary goal was to determine what forms of support learners need to better interact with other users on such online platforms. Ultimately, the results from this needs analysis study will feed into the design of an asynchronous online platform that will foster constructive online discourse amongst Japanese university students, through providing language support and strategies to deal with a variety of situations and interactions, as the voices of tomorrow are drawn out.

## **2. Methodology**

To better ascertain how learners in Japanese higher education are currently utilizing online English tools and platforms, a survey was administered to first-year students at a private university in Japan. The participants were all drawn from the same faculty and attended a lecture given by the researcher. Responding to the survey was voluntary, and learners could access the survey through a QR code on their homework assignment. A short preamble was provided stating that the participants' identities would remain anonymous and that they were free to answer or withdraw whenever they wished. These measures were sufficient to abide by regulations at the host institution, regarding ethics approval for research with human subjects. In total, 67 out of 165 students who attended the lecture completed the survey. The exact demographics of the participants are unknown, but it can be speculated, based on the typical faculty demographics, that the majority were female, aged between 18 and 20 years old, Japanese, and interested in English language education. First-year students were selected for the study as they were considered the most likely to benefit from the future construction of an online platform, representing purposive sampling (Saldaña, 2014).

To address the research question and ultimately inform the construction of an online platform, five questions were posed to participants using the SurveyPlanet.com platform. The questions were designed to address the research question by determining which platforms the participants used, how they used them, whether they were interested in interacting online in English, which academic issues they were interested in, and what problems they faced when interacting online in English. The questions were trialled with a second-year group of students and deemed comprehensible for L2 learners. Several minor adjustments (additional items were added) were made following this trial before the study commenced. The five questions are intended to shed further light on how Japanese university students engage online in English and to provide the researcher with a set of parameters for constructing a new online platform. Table 1 provides a list of the questions and the options available to the participants. As indicated, some questions allowed multiple answers, while others required selecting only one option. Answering all five questions was mandatory to complete the survey.

Descriptive statistics represent the principal form of data collected in this survey. When discussing the pedagogical implications of the findings, Chun et al.'s (2016) four heuristic questions serve as the initial guide for designing a language support program. Additionally, a modified version of Marden and Herrington's (2022) guideline for supporting the construction of OFDs is utilized.

Table 1. Survey questions and response options

1. What online sites/platforms do you access in English? (Multiple answers accepted)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ TED Talks</li> <li>▪ BBC</li> <li>▪ CNN</li> <li>▪ TikTok</li> <li>▪ Instagram</li> <li>▪ Line News</li> <li>▪ YouTube</li> <li>▪ None of these</li> </ul>
2. How do you interact in English on these sites? (Multiple answers accepted)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Just read</li> <li>▪ Read and reply</li> <li>▪ Listen and watch</li> <li>▪ Listen, watch, and reply</li> <li>▪ Post content in English</li> <li>▪ Nothing</li> </ul>
3. Do you want to interact in English more? (Choose one answer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Yes</li> <li>▪ No</li> <li>▪ Not sure</li> </ul>
4. If there was an academic online platform in English for Japanese university students, what kind of issues would you be interested in? (Multiple answers accepted)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gender issues</li> <li>▪ Political issues</li> <li>▪ Economic issues</li> <li>▪ Social issues</li> <li>▪ Environmental issues</li> <li>▪ Language issues</li> <li>▪ International issues</li> <li>▪ Something else</li> </ul>
5. What is the biggest problem for you when interacting online in English? (Choose one answer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ English language skills</li> <li>▪ Fear of negative replies</li> <li>▪ Technology problems</li> <li>▪ Lack of ideas</li> <li>▪ Lack of confidence</li> <li>▪ I don't know any of these sites</li> <li>▪ Something else</li> </ul>

### 3. Findings

The findings, in the form of descriptive statistics, are drawn from the survey responses. They are described here, separately from one another, and then their pedagogical significance is explored in the discussion section. Firstly, Table 2 illustrates the responses to Question 1 (What online sites/platforms do you access in English? Multiple answers permitted).

Table 2. Question 1 responses

Choice	Total responses	Percentage
TEDTalks	27	40.3
BBC	21	31.3
CNN	24	35.8
TikTok	15	22.4
Instagram	32	48.8
Line News	3	4.4
YouTube	32	48.8
None of these	6	8.9

The first finding is that most participants are active online in English. Only six participants (8.9%) stated they are not actively using any of the main platforms, meaning the other 61 (91.1%) are involved in accessing some form of online platform in English. As seen from the responses above, many participants are actively using more than one platform. There is also no clear preference for one specific platform, with the responses evenly distributed across a range, for entertainment and informative purposes.

Responses to Question 2 (How do you interact in English on these sites? Multiple answers permitted) are illustrated below in Table 3.

*Table 3. Question 2 responses*

<b>Choice</b>	<b>Total responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Just read	23	34.3
Read and reply	9	13.4
Listen and watch	46	68.7
Listen, watch, and reply	16	23.9
Post content in English	1	1.5
Nothing	5	7.5

The findings reveal that while the participants do access a range of online platforms in English, they are largely passive with their activities. Approximately 68.7% (46) of the participants simply listen and watch, while 34.3% (23) just read. Only a minority of participants reply (interact online), with 13.4% (9) replying to what they read and 23.9% (16) replying to what they listen to or watch. Just one participant actively initiates interactions online by posting content in English.

Responses to Question 3 (Do you want to interact in English more? One answer permitted) are illustrated below, answering one of the key aspects of the research question.

*Table 4. Question 3 responses*

<b>Choice</b>	<b>Total responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	65	97.0
No	0	0.0
Not sure	2	3.0

This finding could be the definitive finding for this study. It demonstrates that almost all the participants (97%) are very interested in interacting online in English and that if a platform were to be constructed for them (the long-term goal of this project), they would be willing to utilize it. This finding is not completely unexpected, as the participants are all students in a faculty known for its strong English language program.

The responses to Question 4 (If there were an academic online platform/site in English for Japanese university students, what kind of issues would you be interested in? Multiple answers permitted) are illustrated below.

*Table 5. Question 4 responses*

Choice	Total responses	Percentage
Gender	23	34.3
Political	13	19.4
Economic	18	26.9
Social	23	34.3
Environmental	25	37.3
Language	31	46.3
International	40	59.7
Something else	2	2.9

The participants' wide range of interests is apparent, with international (59.7%) and language-related (46.3%) issues drawing slightly more interest than other options. Nevertheless, even political issues, which drew the lowest level of interest, still interested 19.4% (13) of the participants. The underlying finding from these responses is that a future platform for discussion needs to provide a diverse selection of issues and fields for the participants to engage with.

Question 5 was designed to yield insights into how to construct support for the future platform, but also requires the participants to highlight any current problems with interacting online (What is the biggest problem for you when interacting online in English? One answer permitted). Table 6 illustrates their responses.

*Table 6. Question 5 responses*

<b>Choice</b>	<b>Total responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
English language skills	42	62.7
Fear of negative replies	3	4.4
Technological problems	2	2.9
Lack of ideas	9	13.4
Lack of confidence	9	13.4
I don't know any sites	0	0.0
Something else	2	2.9

Clearly, the participants feel that their English language skills (62.7%) are their biggest obstacle when interacting online. Potentially, related to that, a lack of confidence (13.4%) was also cited by some participants, as was a lack of ideas (13.4%).

In summary, it can be ascertained that there is great interest in interacting online in English among the participants, with many already accessing a range of English platforms, albeit largely in a passive manner. The primary obstacle preventing greater and more meaningful online engagement is the perceived lack of English language skills amongst the participants.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study was framed by the research question: What online tools and platforms do Japanese university students utilize in English, and how do they interact? A secondary goal was to determine what forms of support learners need to better interact with other users on such online platforms. By establishing patterns in the current online activity of a selection of Japanese university students, the researcher intends to shape the long-term goal of building an online platform to foster authentic discussions in English and to provide learners with support for using such a platform. The clear answer to the research question is that the participants are utilizing online platforms in English and would like to be more active, but are currently passive with their interactions. The primary reason for their reticence is a concern about their English language skills. Therefore, it is presumed that supporting their English language skills development will increase their willingness to interact online in English and benefit them in numerous ways. Research has shown that even short-term support for online interactions increases L2 learners' confidence in using the target language (Marden & Herrington, 2022). The next step is to determine how best to support the learners in this study.

The goal for supporting online learners should be to help them comprehend the culturally encoded connections among language forms, contexts, meanings, and ideologies that they will encounter and produce across many different forms of media, both traditional and new (Chun et al., 2016). As such, four heuristic questions were suggested to guide those seeking to implement support programs (p. 70), which will be used as a framework to guide discussions on the pedagogical implications of this study.

- Q1. What learning goals do I have for my students?
- Q2. What language, culture, and instructional resources do I have available?
- Q3. How can these resources be used and combined most effectively to serve the established learning goals?
- Q4. How will I assess how effective students' use of these resources is in their attainment of the established learning goals?

Regarding the first question, the primary learning goal for L2 learners has always been to improve their language skills. More recently, MEXT has emphasized the need for Japanese institutions of higher education to foster more practical communicative skills in graduates (Tahira, 2012). Specifically, the goal for the cohort of learners involved in this study and for those who will be utilizing the forum in subsequent years is to be able to develop skills that facilitate interactions with learners from other cultures and to exchange ideas and opinions on various issues. While studying abroad may offer L2 learners a more immersive opportunity in which to craft their skills (Itoi & Mizukura, 2024), online forums offer a more affordable and wider-reaching platform that all learners in Japanese institutions of higher education may utilize. With the participants in this study demonstrating their interest in such a platform, the necessity for proffering such support in order to help them reach their learning goal is clear.

The second of Chun et al.'s (2016) questions relates to available resources. In terms of currently available resources to support L2 learners' interactions as they navigate online forums, there are few. This is typical at most institutions of higher learning (Balaman & Sert, 2017) and necessitates the instructor locating, creating, or adapting materials from other online sources or from his/her own experiences. The participants in this study clearly indicated that support for interactive online English language skills is their primary concern, so supporting materials need to be developed to address this need. Further research is necessary to establish specific strategies to deal with expected situations, such as disagreements, follow-up questions, personal insults, invitations to connect privately, and queries that could be considered irrelevant to the topic or theme being discussed on the platform. Support could take the form of what Li and Cox (2016) called 'tailored facilitation strategies', with specific language phrases to deal with the above-mentioned situations (amongst others).

In terms of specific recommendations for supporting OFD users, Marden and Herrington (2022) provide a useful guideline, from which a modified version is presented in Table 7.

*Table 7. Recommendations for supporting students' initial use of OFDs*

1. Creating an introduction thread where all first-time users can begin by introducing themselves to the forum. This will facilitate a more interactive and supportive atmosphere.
2. Creating a rule for regular access, whereby students will frequently be required to log in and participate.
3. Instructing users to focus their comments and interactions on the content of posts and responses.
4. Avoid criticizing and judging other's contributions, but teach users how to interact in a constructive manner using their critical thinking skills, and to offer positive and constructive feedback.

The last recommendation is crucial for fostering a proactive environment where users can freely express themselves and learn differing perspectives. The crucial finding from the needs analysis survey means that learners will likely hesitate to interact at this stage and doubt their language skills to appropriately engage with other learners. As such, specific language support needs to be offered to learners before they access the forum. This can be organized systematically into thematic areas in which learners need to use their language skills, and in which specific phrases and pieces of language are provided to help them express themselves clearly and appropriately. Table 8 provides a preliminary list of potential situations learners may encounter online and examples of language they can draw upon to facilitate a smoother interaction.

Table 8. Online situations and useful language examples

Situation	Useful language expressions
Disagreeing with a post	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I see where you're coming from, but I have a different perspective...</i></li> <li>• <i>I respect your point, though I don't quite agree for these reasons...</i></li> <li>• <i>That's an interesting take, but I interpret the situation differently...</i></li> </ul>
Clarifying the meaning of a comment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Just to make sure I'm understanding you correctly, are you saying that...?</i></li> <li>• <i>Could you clarify what you meant by...?</i></li> <li>• <i>I'm not sure I follow—could you explain that a bit more?</i></li> </ul>
Supporting a point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>To support what I'm saying, consider that...</i></li> <li>• <i>My reasoning here is based on the fact that...</i></li> <li>• <i>Another example that reinforces my point is...</i></li> </ul>
Hedging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I might be wrong, but...</i></li> <li>• <i>From my understanding...</i></li> <li>• <i>It seems to me that...</i></li> </ul>
Adding information to a point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>To add to that, there's also evidence that...</i></li> <li>• <i>Another detail worth considering is...</i></li> <li>• <i>It's also important to note that...</i></li> </ul>
Suggesting a new view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Another way to look at this might be...</i></li> <li>• <i>Have you considered the possibility that...?</i></li> <li>• <i>There's also a different perspective worth thinking about...</i></li> </ul>
Responding to criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I appreciate the feedback—let me clarify my point a bit.</i></li> <li>• <i>Thanks for pointing that out; I can see why it came across that way.</i></li> <li>• <i>I understand your concern, and here's how I was thinking about it...</i></li> </ul>
Refocusing the discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I think it might help to bring the conversation back to the main point...</i></li> <li>• <i>To refocus a bit, what we're really discussing here is...</i></li> <li>• <i>Let's return to the key issue, which is...</i></li> </ul>
Negotiating a middle ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Maybe there's a compromise here—what if we consider both points by...?</i></li> <li>• <i>I think we might agree on at least part of this; perhaps we can meet in the middle by...</i></li> <li>• <i>Both perspectives have merit—could we find common ground by focusing on...?</i></li> </ul>
Mediating an argument between two other users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I see both of your points—maybe we can find a way to address both concerns...</i></li> <li>• <i>Let's take a step back and focus on what we agree on before tackling the disagreement.</i></li> <li>• <i>It seems like there's common ground here; can we build from that?</i></li> </ul>
Dealing with errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I realize I was mistaken in my earlier comment—here's the correct information...</i></li> <li>• <i>Upon reviewing, I see that I misspoke. What I meant to say is...</i></li> <li>• <i>I want to clarify my previous point, as I gave incorrect information earlier...</i></li> </ul>

Ideally, these examples would be practised before users access the forum and would then be continually supplemented with additional phrases as users encounter further situations during their online interactions. A second needs analysis could then be conducted later to determine additional situations requiring support.

For Chun et al.'s (2016) third question, once resources are developed, determining how these resources can best be utilized to support learners requires them to be piloted first with the learners. During this trial period, the resources need to be implemented in a limited program, carried out before the learners interact online, to minimize any potentially negative effects or problematic encounters. Ideally, the materials would be used in-house, whereby only the participants would initially have access to the platform and would only have to interact with each other. Simulated practice in dealing with the hypothetical situations presented in Table 3 would provide learners with experience interacting in a relatively stress-free environment. Gradually, a wider network of learners could then be incorporated, following which the instructor would reflect on the learning process and resources and then modify them if necessary.

How to assess the effectiveness of English language support provided to learners and determine whether it has met the established learning goals is the final pedagogical question posed by Chun et al. (2016). This could be conducted in several ways as part of an ongoing process, and the findings could then be integrated for a more succinct answer. Firstly, descriptive statistics, such as noting the frequency with which users participate in the forum and exploring long-term trends in their activity, would be indicative of the forum's usefulness. Simply noting if there is an uptake in use by other institutions that are invited to partake in the forum would also be revealing. A more qualitative assessment could include focusing on learners who feel uncomfortable and have become passive participants (or non-participants) on the forum and exploring the reasons behind their reticence. Self-reflection exercises have proven effective in mining the rationale of such learners (Kol & Scholnik, 2008) and could feed into future modifications. Finally, using the Community of Inquiry model, proposed by Garrison et al. (1999), to establish if meaningful learning had occurred, could also be utilized to evaluate the efficacy of the platform.

There are a few limitations in the design of this study that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the issue of voluntary-response bias must be acknowledged. Only respondents who wished to participate did so, which could mean that the participants in this study were initially more interested in online engagement and are not fully representative of the student population in this context. Secondly, there was no accounting for AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this study. This was because AI tools are predicated on learners interacting with the AI, not with other people. Other language learning tools (e.g., Duolingo) were also not included, for similar reasons. These tools certainly offer important language learning opportunities for learners and should be incorporated as part of preparational work before interacting online, as they represent a face-saving option for learners. However, exploring learners' interactions with these tools was deemed to be beyond the scope of this study. Future research could be focused on such explorations.

## **5. Conclusion**

This needs analysis study revealed that while many of the participants (Japanese university students) are utilizing online platforms in English, they are largely doing so in a passive manner (reading, listening, and watching), rather than actively posting or engaging with fellow online participants. This is problematic as they are missing an opportunity for authentic communication, which is lacking in most English language education programs in

Japanese higher education. Nevertheless, the participants were clear about their desire to interact more if appropriate language support is provided. Suggestions were then proffered on how such support can be implemented, assessed, and modified so that the construction and utilization of a future forum for L2 learners to interact in English on a host of academic issues can be successfully constructed.

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