Intercultural Telecollaborative Exchange between China and Japan

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Abstract
This presentation is a progress report on a study being carried out to explore the possibilities of telecollaboration in education. The two teachers from China and Japan have launched an intercultural exchange project between Chinese students learning Japanese as their third language and Japanese students learning cross-cultural communication. The telecollaboration has been implemented in a non-traditional way, which does not involve language exchange as its essential part, in order for both the groups with different learning needs to benefit from these activities. A pilot project conducted from October 2011 to January 2012 revealed some of the promises and challenges. Selecting and setting up the platform was the biggest challenge, which led to other challenges and issues. Based on the lessons learned from the pilot project, the project has been redesigned. A Moodle course has been set up for this project, and several functionalities and the arrangement of the activities have been planned and tested for use, including using Forums for in-group discussions, using NanoGong in forum posting, and using Choices for a warm-up. The Moodle course, the arrangement of the activities, and what the authors are trying to achieve with them will be discussed.

Keywords
Intercultural Exchange, Telecollaboration, Moodle

Background
Intercultural telecollaborative exchanges can have multifarious pedagogical benefits, including promoting learner autonomy, fostering language awareness and fluency, developing learners’ intercultural communicative competence, and facilitating learners’ critical reflection on their own culture (O’Dowd & Eberbach 2004:7). Most studies in the area of intercultural telecollaboration to date have a central focus on language learning through “peer” interaction between two groups of “learners of different native languages work together to help each other learn the other language” (Cziko, 2004:25). However, considering the multifarious nature of telecollaboration, the partner groups do not necessarily have to share common learning objectives, if both sides appreciate what they expect to gain from the collaborative project. This applies to our context. On the one hand, Chinese students learning Japanese at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) are enthusiastic to use the target language outside the classroom, but there are only limited opportunities. On the other hand, Japanese students learning cross-cultural communication at Chiba University of Commerce (CUC) tend to be too afraid of encountering language difficulties to join international communication, and most of them seem to have given up learning a foreign language. An intercultural telecollaborative project between China and Japan using mainly Japanese is beneficial to the UNNC students. It also makes it easier for those hesitant students at CUC to step out of their world, and actual experiences of international communication are expected to help stimulate their curiosity, which may help motivate them to learn another language.

Pilot Project 2011, without Moodle
With these different educational goals for UNNC and CUC students, a pilot project of the non-traditional implementation of intercultural exchanges was conducted from October 2011 to January 2012. Starting by exchanging power point presentations to introduce themselves, the students first posted their comments on each other’s self-introduction presentations to a blog set up for this project. After a brainstorming session in each class, they posted questions about each other’s culture and replied to them. In the final phase, they had a
synchronous communication session on Skype. The pilot project revealed some of the promises and challenges of this non-traditional implementation of telecollaboration.

This intercultural exchange provided opportunity for the Chinese students to use Japanese to communicate with the native speakers, which helped them feel more confident about their Japanese. Also, it led to more active student participation in class discussions, where they explored the topics to find out information on their own. The CUC students appreciated the real communication with non-Japanese, without worrying about the language barrier. Although not all of them actively participated in blogging sessions (partially due to the technical problem described below), the Skype session brought in their unusually active contribution to the conversations.

The biggest challenge was finding a right platform. Using the existing class blog on Blogger or Facebook used at CUC would have been the easiest way, but neither was available in China. As setting up a Moodle site only for this purpose seemed too much work, we tried several Chinese blogging services and started to use one that seemed okay, only to see the service provider deleted the CUC students’ first comments. This technical problem led to less frequent interactions than expected, and left little time for the students to discuss the topics in depth. Also, the platform allowed us to have only many-to-many conversations, which might have hindered them from building personal relationships.

**Cross-Cultural Communication Project 2012, with Moodle**

Based on the lessons learned from the pilot project, we have redesigned our project, which starts in October 2012 and lasts nine weeks, to maximize the intercultural telecollaboration. (i) We found that Moodle would be the best available platform for an exchange project between China and Japan, and have set up a Moodle course in Yamauchi’s Moodle instance for this project, where activities will be done mainly through discussion forums. (ii) Six mixed groups consisting of students from both the classes will be made for in-group discussions, which is expected to help increase student interactions. (iii) Skype video calls, proved to be beneficial to both UNNC and CUC students, will be used as a starter, as well as at the end of the project. An overview of activities is given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weeks</th>
<th>Forums &amp; other Moodle functionalities</th>
<th>Outside Moodle</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W1-W3</td>
<td><strong>Forum</strong>: Self-introduction slides with voice (groups) &amp; Responses in voice with <em>NanoGong</em> (groups/individual)</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>Socialization Personalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W4-W8 Discussions (2 Topics)</td>
<td><strong>Choices</strong>: Teacher-generated warm-up questions <strong>Forum</strong>: Inter-class questions &amp; answers (groups/individual) *NanoGong</td>
<td>In-class discussions</td>
<td>Learning Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W9</td>
<td><strong>Forum</strong>: Writing about the project (individual/groups)</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>Reflection (*) = optional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**To Conclude**

The focus of this presentation will be on the Moodle course set up for this project, its features being tested for use, the arrangement of the activities, and what we are trying to achieve with them. To discuss evaluation methods, the pre- and post-project survey questions will be shown, and other methods including the students’ access-log data (Activity Report and Course Participation) and their behavior observed in the classroom will be mentioned. Also, we will briefly discuss anticipated difficulties in implementing a Moodle course, which made us not to choose Moodle in 2011, although it turned out to be the best available option for us.

**References**


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