

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A CASE STUDY OF VIDEO-CONFERENCE LECTURES FROM JAPAN TO AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

'Blended learning' has been attracting academic interest catalysed by the advance of mixed-media technology and has significance for the global educational community and evolutionary development of pedagogical approaches to optimise student learning. This paper examines one aspect of blended teaching of Japanese language and culture in the Australian classroom. The study encompasses the Japan-to-Australia component of a bi-lateral teaching and learning program established in 2002 between the Faculty of Arts, the University of Sydney, Australia and the Faculty of Education, Gifu University, Japan. The significance of the program was affirmed by the National Institute of Multimedia Education (NIME), a Japanese government agency dedicated to research and development in e-learning/distance education in the tertiary sector, who confirmed in 2006 that the programme was the only one of its kind. Lectures provided by Gifu University, are in real time, the mode of delivery is via web-based video conference. The international exchange of lectures is one component of a rich teaching strategy created for the multicultural environment of the Australian classroom. Findings draw on student learning outcomes and views on motivation as the criterion of the efficacy of the program. The study confirms, within the defined parameters, that video-conferencing from Japan to Australia is an effective tool, as an adjunct to current teaching methods within the classroom, to enhance learning and motivate students learning Japanese culture?

KEYWORDS

Blended learning, Technology, Motivation, International education, Video conference, Asia-Pacific.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores application and findings from an example of web-based video conferencing in the context of blended learning on teaching and student reception of aspects of Japanese culture in Australia. The project entails an international distance-learning relationship between The University of Sydney, Australia and Gifu University in Japan with the exchange of real time lectures using the technology of web-based video-conferencing. Lectures on Japanese language and culture are transmitted from Gifu University and incorporated as discrete modules into Japanese studies courses for The University of Sydney students at the third year level. Conversely lectures in Australian studies are transmitted from Sydney to Gifu University and incorporated into existing courses in cross-cultural communication and English as a foreign language. The lectures delivered from Australia to Japan are mentioned but the prime purpose of this study is to ascertain the extent of student engagement in Australia with lectures from Gifu University to the University of Sydney. The outcome of lectures from Gifu University in 2012 have been analysed. The intent of the analysis is to gauge the extent of student learning patterns and the extent of their motivation derived from the video-conference lectures. The content of the paper is part of a continuing study which includes learning outcomes in both Japan and Australia.

Section 1 of this paper introduces the background of the international distance learning project from the Australian perspective. Section 2 details aspects of the project in respect to lectures presented in Japan for students in Australia. Section 3 is the theoretical framework towards addressing the research question arising from the project and the applied methodology. The findings from the project are in section 4 and conclusions in section 5.

The collective experience derived from the project of teaching using video-conferencing is delineated, focussing upon the cultural and linguistic issues which have arisen. Through this some implications of the digital revolution on teaching and learning in the Asia-Pacific region and the influences on student learning and motivation are explored.

2. BACKGROUND

In Australia we are witnessing an expansion of curriculum driven by an increasingly multi-cultural society. Established forms of international exchange between universities normally require students to travel abroad for a significant period of time. There is enthusiasm for Australian based students to visit Japan but the process is costly and, from a grants viewpoint, competitive. Typically only three to five students, less than one percent of the overall enrolment in The University of Sydney's Japanese Department visit Japan in any one year. International distance learning utilizing video-conferencing offers the opportunity, particularly for students who have not visited Japan, to have a uniquely authentic Japanese learning experience. In this sense, distance learning can impart a global educational experience at a local level and create a different form of student mobility.

The lecture exchange program between Gifu and Sydney universities is a teaching and learning initiative between Australia and Japan was a pioneer project. 'The National Institute of Multimedia Education (NIME), a Japanese government agency dedicated to research and development in e-learning/distance education in the tertiary sector, has reported that the current relationship between Gifu and Sydney universities is the only institution-to-institution program of distance learning between a Japanese and an overseas university' (Mycak et al., 2011) The seeds and conceptualization for the project was initiated in Japan. The project has generated considerable media interest, particularly in Japan (Mycak and Yasumoto, 2010). The inaugural trial lecture transmission from Gifu University to the University of Sydney was reported in the national newspaper, the *Australian* (Giglio, 2002). The formal signing of an agreement between the two universities was reported in Japanese television news broadcasts Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) Gifu and Gifu BC, and in four Japanese newspapers: *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* (nation-wide), *Chunichi News* (regional), and *Gifu News* (local). The lectures transmitted from the University of Sydney have received press coverage in Japan, on television (*Rabu Waido Today* [11/1/05] and in newspapers: *Gifu News* (2002b); *Chunichi News* (2002a) ; *Chunichi News*(2005b); *Gifu News* (2005a); and *Yomiuri* (2006).

The break through and opportunity for cost effective international learning came when the enabling technology became available. The University of Sydney was well placed to embark on international distance learning as some years prior to the project The University of Sydney had used the technique with its Faculty of Medicine. Gifu University and The University of Sydney initially trialled international distance learning with ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) dial-up circuits, this approach was costly and subject to the vagaries of dial up connections at that time. Nishizawa points out the issue of costs in using ISDN (Mycak et al., 2011). Japan in 1997 had a transmission rate of 384 kbps which was adequate and provided almost television picture quality, the early 2000s saw development continuing with video-conferencing expanding from its early days in the late 1990s *CNA Report Japan* (2012).

A major step forward from both a cost base and quality of technology was taken advantage of when IP (Internet Protocol) links became available. Digital technology continues to progress where domestic or international exchanges can fall into the desk top type for small groups of students and group type for large screen presentations. Currently development of video-conference equipment provides for the transmission and reception of high definition three dimensional images. The University of Sydney uses the group type with a large presentation screen in two dimensional picture format.

One prospective and significant problem with the video-conference format is that it is preferred that the presenter requires a degree of technical skills associated with a video-conferencing system that is used in international distance learning. Any prospective fault with the equipment need to be addressed prior to the video-conference as an equipment failure during a lecture, which is in real time, can impair the quality of presentation and in turn reception of the content and in the worst case may need the lecture to be terminated. It is recommended that as further insurance towards the efficacy of an audio-visual conference that the presenter has on hand technical support available to during a lecture to ensure that the lecture continues to plan and that any technical glitches not anticipated are resolved with expediency.

It is an imperative that the lecturer in Japan and the lecturer and class receiving the lecture in Australia are not encumbered with technical problems during the transmission and reception period.

It is postulated that while both the style and the content of international distance learning could, and perhaps should, embrace a set of at least two discrete elements, that is a matrix of video-conferencing from an overseas source integrated into local course content locally presented in a seamless and consistent presentation. Technology is not a panacea for poor course content and structure. It is affirmed that there is a need to be aware that much depends upon the progress and innovations in the field of technology. Technical advances in global communication are a continuum and the transmission of images and verbal communication is synchronized in real time with minimal time lag between transmission and reception only serves to enhance course quality. The advent of higher speed digital highways will continue to improve the quality of video-conferencing enabling students in one location to receive a lecture from another location in real time with progressively improved interactive speech and vision. Importantly the differentiation of cultural and linguist competencies between transmitter of lectures and receptor students cannot be over emphasised. One advantage with video-conferencing, rather than audio-conferencing which compensates for prospective mismatches is that with visual images supporting the verbal content the presenter can be alert to body language clues. The visual images enable adjustment to presentation timing and possibly some cultural sensitivity with content.

Mycak has reported various forms of multimedia have been employed, using a high visual component (video, photographs, and images). The use of real-time transmissions with the added benefit of the small time difference (maximum two hours) between Japan and the Eastern Australia has maximized immediacy. There are opportunities ongoing to complement real time video-conferencing with e-learning and stored lecture content enabling on-demand studies for student distance learning. Improved student to student and student lecturer interactivity is also receiving ongoing attention (Mycak et al., 2011).

The sustainability of video-conferencing also depends upon institutional support and a willingness to continue to invest in new technology to enhance system topology. This requires a corresponding commitment to the retention and training of technical support staff. Gifu University and Sydney University have made these commitments to date with the costs of high definition presentation equipment presenting a mutual a budgeting challenge. Video-conferencing systems should ideally be mirror imaged.

3. VIDEO-CONFERENCE LECTURES FROM JAPAN TO AUSTRALIA

3.1 Purpose, Content and Participation

This segment of the project is to advance the reception of Japanese lectures from Gifu University to the benefit of The University of Sydney students through video-conferencing; video-conferencing has been integrated into two of The University of Sydney courses. Firstly the option course 'Media and Popular Culture' the students participating in this option have an intermediate level of Japanese language. Very few of these students have been to Japan. This course aims to discourse the new Japan and its youth culture and to guide The University of Sydney students to understand and broaden their knowledge of inherent and changing aspects of Japanese society and culture. The course content includes newspaper reading, video analysis, discussion and research presentation, and video-conferencing. Themes to be covered are from Japanese traditions through to contemporary popular culture, students explore Japan utilising six modules. They are 1) Positioning and status of people in the Japanese society, changing values. 2) Popular Culture in Japan; J-pop music, J-Anime, J-Manga and its reception in East Asia 3) Japanese print and television media, sociological and cultural impacts 4) Evolution of traditional Japanese traditions and external influences. 5) Discourse J-pop language relating social issues 6) 'Soft Power' and Youth Culture. Secondly 'Japanese advanced level', these students have advanced level of Japanese language and a number have language and cultural experience gained from studying in Japan. These lectures, which include video-conferencing, place emphasis on acquiring basic research skills as well as presentation and discussion skills in Japanese, this unit of study links with honours courses. Classes are in the Japanese language and the themes include 6 modules: 1) text discourse, 2) Contemporary literature, 3) Academic essays, 4) Critiques, 5) Media text: film and 6) Media text: TV drama.

The motivation theories of scholars, Dörnyei, Gardner and Schmidt (Gardner, 2001, Schmidt et al., 1996) have been applied when relevant to design the overall content of the courses where video-conference lectures form part of the syllabi. Each video-conference session is planned and themed prior to the individual video conferences taking place, ensuring that the content and context is relevant to the overall course objectives. The reception of lecture modules from Japan is part of The University of Sydney's commitment to teaching excellence aiming for teaching best practice utilising existing and evolving technologies. To create immediacy, it is argued that creating an effective multifaceted learning environment in the Australian classroom stimulates student motivation in the learning process with enhanced learning outcomes. The use of video-conferencing in real time is an important element in the overall teaching strategy for the student to learn about Japan within the boundaries of the course content. Video conferences can embrace a multitude of topics but must have content relevant to student needs within course objectives.

3.2 Lecture Content

Lectures, which students are required to critique, have been delivered from 2005 to 2012: Include 1) 'Edo Hayashi' a traditional Japanese music performance often played in festivals and in Noh plays (Hayashi or Bayashi is a term used to describe an instrumental ensemble consisting of a flute, a drum, and various percussion instruments such as a gong, a scraper and a clapper, Noh is a major form of classical Japanese music drama that has been performed since the 14th century). 2) 'Kireru Jidou' (Emotional Outburst) Current social issues among children 10-15 years old, harming other children physically and psychologically. 3) 'Futokou to Hikikomori' (Social Withdrawal). One of the critical social problems among junior high school and senior high school students in Japan who are withdrawn from life for more than three to four years. 4). Edo Popular culture 'Writing ability amongst Japanese children', 5) Morino Youchien (Kindergarten in the forests).

Two lectures were delivered in 2012. The first lecture was about socially withdrawn Japanese youth and this included an outline of the topic from a theoretical perspective. This was presented to both intermediate and advanced level students. The second lecture was on writing ability amongst Japanese children presented intermediate level students. During each video-conference students were required to make notes summarizing the main lecture points, participate in ensuing group discussions and finally submit an assignment: The assignment guidelines require the students to isolate major issues from each video conference, critically analyse the content and express in writing their views and opinions.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is derived to determine the extent of learning and student motivation as a result of distance learning utilising video-conferencing. It draws on findings from research on language teaching and in particular student motivation. Student motivation has been extensively researched. I am not aware of research on student motivation derived from the learning outcomes arising from the use of the video-conference module exchange as part of an overall teaching structure. Kato, Yasumoto and Van Aaken have conducted comparative studies and examined motivation of university students in Australia and the USA over a three year period within the confines of traditional face to face teaching. (Kato et al., 2007). Motivation is the 'driving force in any situation'(Gardner, 2001). Motivation is a prominent element in pursuing anything in our lives. 'The truly motivated individual displays effort, desire, and affect'(Gardner, 2001) Many second/foreign language (L2) researchers in the past have reported that motivation is a key factor determining the rate and success of L2 acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001, Oxford and Shearin, 1996). People are generally highly motivated at the outset when they decide to accomplish some tasks. However, because of obstacles encountered on the way or for various other reasons, they often give up. It can be argued that it is indeed difficult to continue to persevere with learning the same thing over a long period until the student masters the essence of what learning is and has the desire and enthusiasm to continue with it.

A few decades after Gardner and Lambert established their motivation theory in the 1950s, Dörnyei (2001) claimed 'L2 motivation research is currently flourishing' (p. 52). However, research into the motivation of learners of Japanese is still less reported in the L2 acquisition research field than for learners of the European languages.

Also, the effect of where the L2 is taught appears to be neglected: little is published on studies comparing the degree of motivation among different tertiary institutions. Japanese is regarded as one of the priority foreign languages for teaching and learning at all levels in Australia. These observations in respect to Japan and Australia in respect to distance learning are also relevant by example for history and culture. Video-conferencing in real time provides an opportunity beyond language teaching for students learning experience including the silent language (Hall, 1990) to be enriched and motivation reinforced.

Teaching is both a challenge and opportunity for teacher and student. In the contemporary University environment in Australia we are faced with cost and budgeting restraints which require corresponding actions to search for better and more cost effective methods of content delivery and pupil stimulus directed to improve student learning outcomes. Three aspects are paramount in this scenario, firstly face to face contact time, secondly student motivation and thirdly utilisation of technology to enhance the efficacy of student learning. Of these, arguably, student motivation is paramount to learning outcomes and them staying the distance in the learning journey. A quotation attributed to Confucius some two thousand five-hundred years ago resonates with the twenty first century classroom 'I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand' (Blotnick, 2009). More pointedly to student motivation *Suki koso mono no joozu nare* (what you like you will do well in) (Kato et al., 2007). This Japanese saying clearly points out that motivation is the 'driving force in any situation' (Gardner, 2001). Motivation is a prominent element in pursuing anything in our lives. 'The truly motivated individual displays effort, desire, and affect' (Gardner, 2001).

When students commence learning for example a language, their instructors hope that they will reach the top level and go on to master the language. However several studies show that L2 learners have a high attrition rate, especially when their native or first language (L1) is English and they are learning Japanese/or Chinese as L2 (Kato, 2001, Saito and Samimy, 1996, Aacken, 2003, Watt, 1997). Yet, if the initial enthusiasm for learning, i.e. high motivation, could be retained throughout a course of learning, students would be more likely to achieve their language goals. It would be beneficial then for instructors to know whether advanced students are more enthusiastic and satisfied with their learning experience or whether they are more worried and uncomfortable in comparison with beginning or intermediate students. It was decided to explore how and whether video-conference as tool can positively affect learner's motivation. This study also examined whether the established theory, i.e. that learners' motivation was the best determinant of students' success is also true with distance learning utilising video-conferencing. 'Motivation is one of the main determinations of foreign language learning achievement' (Dornyei, 1994). 'Learning a second language requires the adaption of word sounds, pronunciations, words orders and other behavioural and cognitive features that are part of another culture. re' (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). These views it is argued are also equally relevant to teaching culture.

This paper introduces a teaching methodology, as a component in an overall teaching strategy, for teaching Japanese language and culture utilising bi-lateral video-conferencing between Japan and Australia. This approach utilising available technology is designed to enhance student motivation and distance learning outcomes in both countries by 'hearing, seeing and doing' in a pro-active cyberspace classroom. Many researchers have focussed on anxiety as an important component of student motivation and as a predictor of success in language teaching (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991, Walt and Dreyer, 1997, Saito and Samimy, 1996, Kato, 2002). This study is focussed on video-conferencing methodology and student learning outcomes and has not considered student anxiety or gender with the emphasis on the means used for, and content of, the educational transfers and reception. The research findings are based upon feedback from three The University of Sydney student tranches from two video conferences against six parameters comprising: Understanding the Theme; Understanding the Context; Understanding the Issues; Writing ability; Expression of opinions and motivation.

4.1 Research Question

Is video-conferencing between Japan and Australia an effective tool, as an adjunct to current teaching methods within the classroom, to enhance comprehension of Japanese culture and motivate students' learning Japanese culture?

4.2 Methodology

The focus of this paper is outcomes from web-based video-conferences Japan to Australia in 2012 forming a component of an overall teaching strategy. The methodology applied is extracted from a broader based research project which includes bi-lateral learning outcomes from blended teaching in Japan and Australia over a three year period. In the expanded study the outcomes are critiqued against publication on the application of digital technology to pedagogy. Research for this paper was carried out in Australia on The University of Sydney students who had received two video-conference lectures transmitted from Gifu University in Japan. The student understanding of the content of each video-conference within the study was ascertained against six criteria. Analysis was conducted on the quality of their post conference written assignments. Measurement was against each of the six criteria and numbered from one to five. The minimum mark is one and the maximum mark 5. A Likert type scale is commonly used in questionnaires and is the most widely used scale in survey research; it is a form of rating scale. The scale enables qualitative data to be ascribed quantitative values. The criteria selected were directed to ascertain the efficacy of the video-conference from Japan to Australia on student comprehension of lecture content and their thinking in respect to their personal motivation.

Table 1. The measurement criteria.

Criteria	none	little	moderate	high	very high
Understanding the Context (Topic)	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding the Theme (Content)	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding the Issues (Issues)	1	2	3	4	5
Expression of opinions (Opinion)	1	2	3	4	5
Writing ability (Writing)	1	2	3	4	5
Motivation to learn (Motivation)	1	2	3	4	5

5. FINDINGS

Table 2 shows the average results from the Likert analysis of the intermediate level (32 students) and advanced level (18 students) derived from the video-conference topic: Social withdrawal.

Table 2.

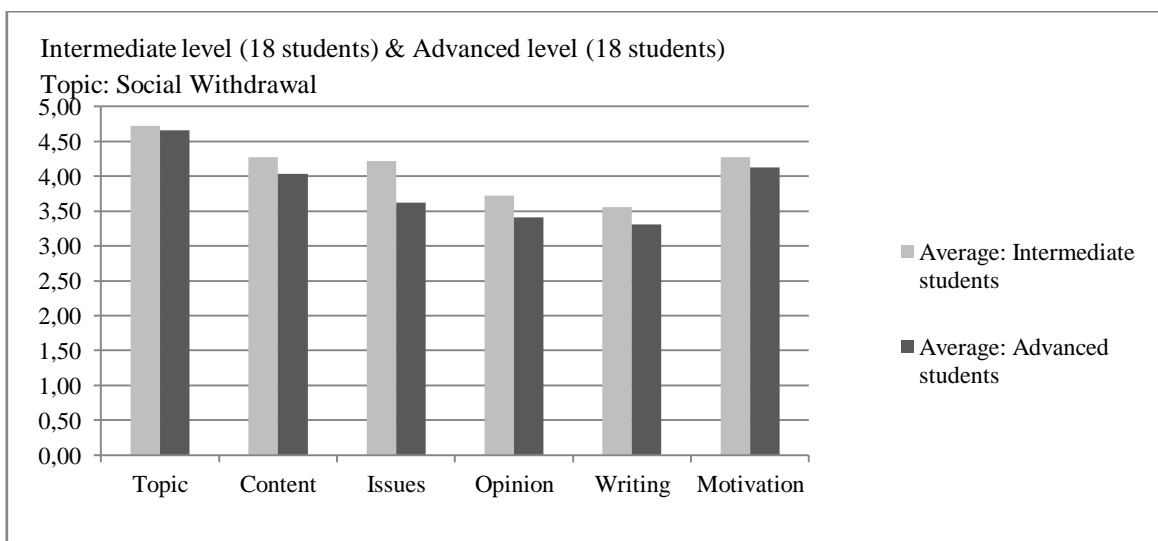
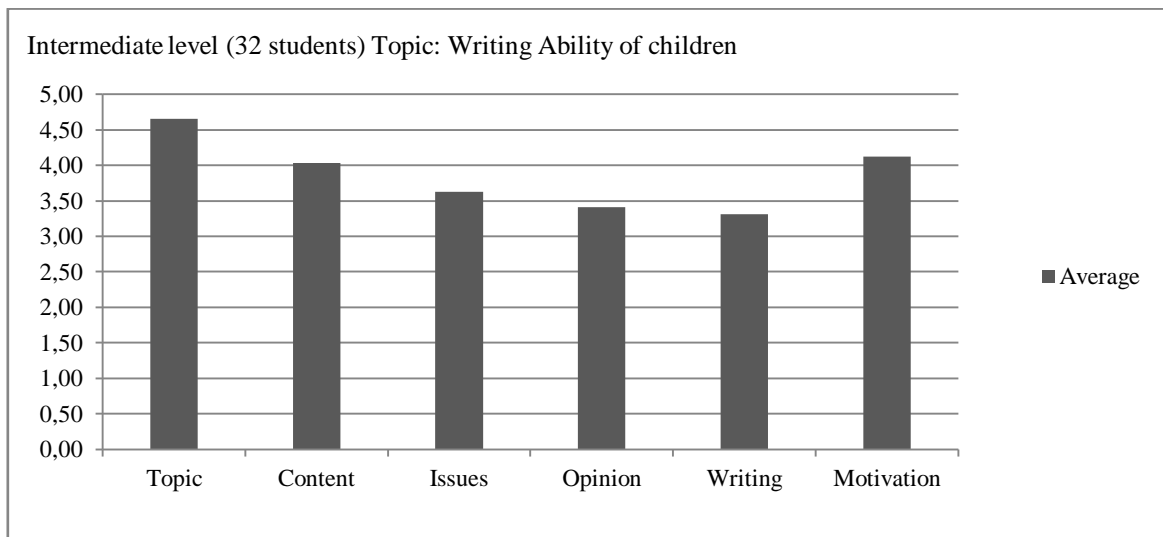


Table 3 shows the average results from the Likert analysis of the intermediate level (32 students) derived from the video conference. Topic: Writing Ability of children.

Table 3.



As deduced from the findings the video-conference concept and reception is a very important component in the courses falling within this study. The trends across the spectrum of topic, content, issues, opinions, writing and motivation between the two video conferences and the three groups of receptor students have been shown. The comparative average of each measured component of the respective Likert scales across the three groups is similar.

Some deviations in outcomes can be observed between the performance of intermediate level and advanced level students who participated in the video-conference Social withdrawal. The findings show that in every respect the reception and subsequent writing quality and understanding of the issues was marginally better with the intermediate level students than the advanced level students. These findings were counter-intuitive to my expectations. Intermediate level students have a language proficiency which is just suitable for them to receive and comprehend lectures in presented in Japanese whereas the advanced level students have adequate language competency. The advanced students were more actively engaged during and in the post conference discussion but relatively underperforming in the write up. Most encouraging across the range of the survey was the high level of student motivation. Riessman developed narrative theory and narrative accounts in Social Sciences and Humanities research by using dialogic analysis of interviewing (Riessman, 1999).

The feedback from the students towards video-conferencing utilising dialogic analysis has been very positive ‘hard to listen to, difficult, but challenging’ ‘interesting, and want more’, ‘Never had an opportunities learning through video-conferencing’, ‘give us more time for an assessment tasks’ and etc. Teaching good practice and creating an effective learning environment is challenging and an ongoing and evolving task. Video-conferencing gives students opportunities for direct contact in real time to learn about selective aspects of Japan.

6. CONCLUSION

The blended teaching strategy was well received by students and importantly all students were sufficiently motivated to complete their respective courses. Video-conferencing has a theoretical and practical part to play in the teaching and learning process, it lifts the classroom from local to international. The interactivity of the video-conference helps to dissolve real or imagined barriers to the learning process and is also edifying for the video-conferencing lecturers.

The use of six selected parameters relevant to the two video conferences and measurement utilizing a Likert scale has been confirmed as an appropriate measure of student engagement with the selected topics. It is acknowledged that the research sample is small and the expanded study will provide additional data for analysis and a more comprehensive understanding of students' learning derived from video conferencing content.

Cultural and linguistic issues do arise in both Japan and Australia, particularly at the intermediate student level with video-conferencing compounded by the immediacy of the distance teaching methodology. Notwithstanding this form of teaching has been confirmed as very fulfilling by the lecture presenters and students. Reaching new audiences who would not otherwise have the exposure to any form international education is important. Real-time transmission of content, which video-conferencing provides, achieves that end. The project findings have confirmed what international distance learning is capable of achieving. The project has extended the horizon of existing courses in Japan and Australia by inviting from abroad specialist lecturers who can talk on a connected topic but who could bring an entirely new vista to the series of preceding lectures. Thus, by presenting lectures from Japan, there is an enriching of existing curricula in Australia.

The Sydney-Gifu universities collaborative program provides an ongoing opportunity for video-conferencing as a supplement to the boundaries of the classroom, to the educational and social benefit of both Japanese and Australian students. Video-conferencing gives Australian students opportunities for direct contact in real time cyber space with Japan and opportunity is presented to students to learn about selective aspects of Japan. This tool is an important part of the evolving teaching aids and helps to create an effective learning environment. For Australian universities broadening the student learning experience has become an important aim, as has the need to raise awareness of Australia's place within the Asia-Pacific region.

The broadest aims of international educational exchange can be served through international distance learning, by allowing students a readily accessible but truly global educational experience. My findings confirm that the collaborative work with video-conferencing between Gifu University and the University of Sydney is playing an important role in the development of education across geographical boundaries in the emerging global village. The model established by Gifu and Sydney universities is a benchmark for future international distance learning. Video-conferencing is playing a significant role in bringing Japan into the Australian classroom. The audio-visual transfers in real time challenge, stimulate and motivate the students. The process is interactive and moves the students forward from perceived stereotypes in Australia to current realities including some of the rapid social changes happening in Japanese society.

The findings confirm that video conferences from Japan to Australia have an important part to play in the teaching and learning process. Video-conferencing helps students to consolidate learning with ensuing group discussion and assignment preparation. Through this process they develop critical thinking and analytical skills. The findings also confirm student motivation and well-founded information retention confirmed by written assignments. The progress to date will be the subject of ongoing research to determine the motivation factors for students of Gifu University beyond the preliminary findings and also to carry out evaluations in the future in respect to student motivation and compare these with findings to date.

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