

The integration of a three-year-long intercultural collaborative project into a foreign language classroom for the development of intercultural competence

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Abstract. Many studies on intercultural communication introduced how their collaborative projects were conducted. There are also several studies that discuss how intercultural collaborative activities can be integrated into a foreign language curriculum, as well as a big project (the INTENT project) that helps teachers integrate collaborative activities into their language curricula. Nonetheless, intercultural collaborative projects have not yet been mainstreamed for various reasons, such as insufficient pedagogical support from their institutions and a lack of interest in getting involved in projects among colleagues. We need to continuously examine and develop activities that can be relatively easily integrated into language curricula and that are appealing to more teachers to get involved in collaborative projects. Starting in the fall of 2013, we have been conducting a three-year experimental Facebook video project with learners of English in Japan and those of Japanese in the US. This paper will provide a brief overview of the Facebook collaboration projects and present the outcomes.

Keywords: intercultural competence, Facebook, Japanese as a foreign language, English as a foreign language.

1. Introduction

Many researchers of foreign language learning have pointed out the importance of the development of learners' intercultural competence along with their

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language competencies. It has been claimed that learners could develop their intercultural communication skills through activities with native speakers, and many collaborative projects have been conducted in foreign language education (e.g. Belz, 2003; Jauregi & Canto, 2012). There are several studies that discuss how intercultural collaborative activities can be integrated into a foreign language curriculum, as well as a big project (the INTENT project) that helps teachers integrate collaborative activities into their language curricula (e.g. Furstenberg & Levet, 2010; O'Dowd, n.d.). Nonetheless, intercultural collaborative projects have not yet been mainstreamed for various reasons, such as insufficient pedagogical support from their institutions and a lack of interest in getting involved in projects among colleagues due to the amount of work for organizing a project (O'Dowd, 2011). We need to continuously examine and develop activities that can be relatively easily integrated into language curricula and that are appealing to more teachers to get involved in collaborative projects.

Starting in the fall of 2013, we have been conducting a three-year experimental Facebook video project using learners of English in Japan and those of Japanese in the US. The purpose of our research is to identify effective procedures and activities to establish guidelines for intercultural collaboration which could be integrated into an actual foreign language curriculum. During the first and the second years of this project, we have reviewed the outcomes of the previous year's project and revised the procedure and activities for the next project. We plan to conduct a more systematic project in the fall and winter of 2015 and 2016. This paper will briefly provide an overview of the Facebook collaboration projects and present part of the outcomes of the projects.

2. Method

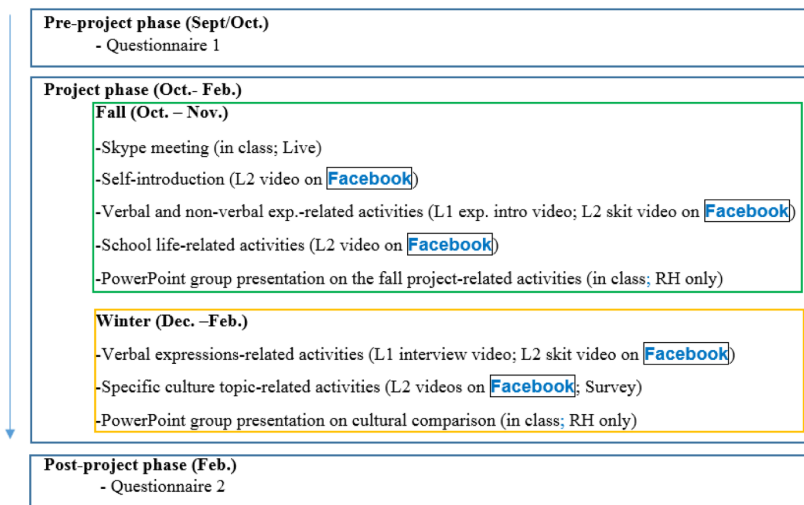
2.1. Overview of the project

The students involved in this project have all been enrolled in the same English (general English) and Japanese (second-year Japanese) courses at the same colleges in Japan (KIT) ($N=40$) and the US (RH) ($N=21$), respectively. Each collaborative project lasts from September to February every year, and the students work on many activities both in English and Japanese to develop their intercultural competence as well as their linguistic competencies. The following chart shows a brief overview of the project conducted from 2013 to 2014 and 2014 to 2015.

As shown in Figure 1, each project started and ended with a questionnaire which is a self-evaluation of students' intercultural communication knowledge and skills. The

Facebook project started with a Skype meeting with their partner university. After producing self-introduction videos on Facebook, student groups at both schools worked on several sets of series of activities on particular topics, such as verbal/non-verbal communication, school culture introduction, and culture research survey, and interacted with each other during this phase. Each set of activities included several activities other than Facebook as well, such as reflection logs on the video assignments, in-class conversation activities, using the expressions introduced by the partner school, and in-class PowerPoint group presentations.

Figure 1. Overview of the project

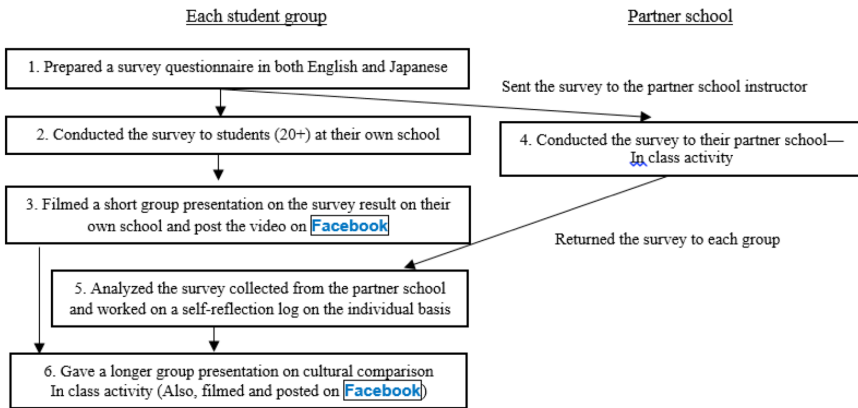


For verbal and non-verbal communication activities conducted in the fall, for instance, in case of RH students, each group introduced English verbal and non-verbal expressions and posted their video on the English page on Facebook. KIT students did the same tasks: introducing Japanese expressions and posted videos on the Japanese page. Each RH student then learned the L2 (Japanese) expressions and worked on the self-reflection log. Each group produced a skit video in L2, posted the video on the Japanese page, and interacted with KIT students.

The culture-research survey activities, on the other hand, were research based, though there was less interaction observed on Facebook due to the nature of the activities. Figure 2 shows a series of activities that each group worked on³.

3. Due to the curriculum difference, only RH students worked on the fifth and the six activities.

Figure 2. Culture research survey



2.2. Materials

We have used a wide range of methods to assess our intercultural collaborative projects with reference to the previous research (Deardorff, 2009), including observation by the instructors, student presentations, student portfolios (several sets of assignments in both written and oral forms), and pre- and post-self-evaluation questionnaires conducted before and after each project. However, we will present the outcomes of the self-assessment questionnaires for the sake of the limited space in this paper.

2.3. Self-assessment questionnaires

As one of the tools to assess learners' intercultural communication knowledge and competence, we prepared self-assessment questionnaires which were used before and after each project in 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.

The questionnaires consisted of self-evaluation items on verbal and non-verbal communication knowledge (section A) and skills (B) as well as attitudes toward other cultures (C). We referred to the intercultural knowledge and competence rubric prepared by The American Association of Colleges and Universities for section A and B items (AACU⁴), Elola and Oskoz (2008) for section C (see Appendix).

4. <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/VALUE/InterculturalKnowledge.pdf>

3. Results and conclusion

As shown in Table 1, the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed a significant difference between the pre- and the post-project in many of the questionnaire items. Overall, students at both colleges tended to feel that they gained more knowledge (A) and skills (B) of verbal and non-verbal communication. The reason that the RH students' results in C1 and C2 did not show significant differences might be related to the initial differences between the two schools. The Mann Whitney test showed that RH students scored significantly higher regarding the relevance between the language and culture (C1) and lower regarding sharing the same values among people in the same society (C2). These results imply that the average RH student had thought that learning the culture was important to learn the target language and that each individual in one society had different values toward money, family, and religions before the project started.

Table 1. Results of the Wilcoxon signed ranks test

	N	A (knowledge)		B (skills)		C (attitudes)		
		A1. Verbal	A2. Non-v	B1. Verbal	B2. Non-v	C1	C2	C3
RH (US)	21	<.01	<.05	<.01	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	<.05
KIT (Japan)	40	<.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	n.s.	<.05

Concerning item C3 (learning cultural differences), we observed the opposite results: while RH students thought that they learned cultural differences through the project, KIT students did not. These differences were statistically significant. This might be related to the fact that due to the curriculum difference, KIT students could not work on cultural comparison related tasks (see items 4 and 5 in Figure 2), that their partner schools did. Even though students at both schools completed almost the same tasks throughout the project, explicit tasks on cultural differences and similarities between two schools (i.e. student presentation) might have actually helped students to reflect on them or perhaps have simply affected student perceptions of how much they learned. Further studies in this regard shall be called for.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions. This questionnaire will provide us with information that will help us develop the cultural curriculum for this course. Please, be honest, since this questionnaire will not affect your grade.

A. Knowledge on intercultural communication (verbal: A-1; non-verbal A-2)

Which following statement(s) well describe(s) your knowledge on intercultural communication?

		A-1: <u>In verbal communication</u> (choose one ↓)	A-2: <u>In non-verbal communication</u> (choose one ↓)
1	I have a minimal level of understanding of cultural differences <u>in verbal/non-verbal communication</u> .		
2	I identify some cultural differences <u>in verbal/non-verbal communication</u> and am aware that misunderstandings can occur based on those differences.		

3	I recognize and participate in cultural differences in verbal/non-verbal communication.		
4	I articulate a complex understanding of cultural differences <u>in verbal/non-verbal communication</u> (e.g. demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings).		

B. Skills on intercultural communication (verbal: B-1; non-verbal: B-2)

Which following statement well describe(s) your skills on intercultural communication?

		B-1: <u>In verbal communication</u> (choose one ↓)	B-2: <u>In non-verbal communication</u> (choose one ↓)
1	I am unable to negotiate a shared understanding of cultural differences <u>in verbal/non-verbal communication in Japanese.</u>		
2	I begin to negotiate a shared understanding based on cultural differences <u>in verbal/non-verbal communication in Japanese.</u>		
3	I am able to negotiate a shared understanding of cultural differences <u>in verbal/non-verbal communication in Japanese.</u>		
4	I am able to skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on various aspects of cultural differences in Japanese.		

C. On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), answer the following statements

1. Given that I am studying Japanese, it is relevant to learn about Japanese culture (from Japan).

1 2 3 4 5

Explain:

2. I believe that in general people in Japan have the same values towards family, money, education and religion.

1

2

3

4

5

Explain:

3. I believe that talking to the KIT students will help me see that there are differences between people from your home country and people from Japan.

1

2

3

4

5

Explain:

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