

Analysis of a Japan-Philippines telecollaboration from a social realist perspective

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Abstract. This study applies social realist theory to the analysis of an ongoing online telecollaboration between Japanese undergraduate students in a classroom setting in Japan and Filipino teachers in an English conversation school in Cebu, the Philippines. The accepted goals of telecollaboration in an international context are the development of intercultural communication and linguistic skills. Analysis showed that, without guidance, the influence of Japanese educational policies on students, including a version of internationalisation known as *kokusaika*, can result in intracultural – rather than intercultural – communication. It is suggested that a focus on “small” – rather than “large” – culture may help address this issue in Japan, and improve intercultural and linguistic awareness.

Keywords: telecollaboration, social realism, *kokusaika*, small culture.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the complex interplay of sociocultural aspects in ongoing online telecollaboration using the theoretical framework of social realism to analyse telecollaboration. Through this, we can perceive the influences of educational policy and the benefits of direct contact with people in other nations. Archer (1995) defined social realism as a method for examining structure, culture, and agency separately, and then together, to see the relationships among them. In this study, we used social realism to examine four elements of telecollaboration: context, setting, situated activity, and self. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected over several iterations of the exchanges.

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Research has shown that intercultural exchange between people of different cultural backgrounds aids the development of L2 acquisition and intercultural communicative competence (Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016). However, Liddicoat (2013) argues that L2 education in Japan focuses on the development of a Japanese identity and on the unidirectional, outward transmission of Japanese culture, rather than bidirectional intercultural exchange.

To combat the cultural essentialism and *othering* which is an element of “difference-focused ‘large culture’”, Holliday (1999) coined the term “small culture” and defined this paradigm as “the dynamics at work in any cohesive group” (p. 237). While *large culture* research looks for details and differences, research into *small culture* looks at the perpetually changing interpretive process and cohesive group dynamics.

2. Method

Since 2015, 119 chemistry undergraduates, L2 learners at a Japanese national university, have taken part in four monthly, synchronous online Skype sessions, on university-provided mini iPads. Divided into small groups by their classroom teacher, they research four general topics, for example, ‘The Philippine’. Assigning broad topics allows them to narrow the topic to one that interests them. They spend three lessons each month preparing and practicing for the online sessions. They then present for five minutes to their Filipino teacher on one topic a month, followed by interactive feedback and discussion with their Japanese classmates and Cebu teacher.

Table 1. Research map (adapted from Belz, 2002)

Additional factors	Research elements	Types of data	
		Qualitative	Quantitative
History E.g. relations between countries, patterns of socialisation in classroom FLL	Context and setting	Scholarly publications, policy documents, learner reflections	Questionnaire data
Power E.g. student-teacher or NS/NNS differentials	Situated activity and self	Participant observation, learner reflections, teacher reflections, video recordings	Questionnaire data Assessments

This seemingly straightforward activity revealed complex and multifaceted examples of social interaction shaped by both macro- and micro-level sociological features (Carter & Sealey, 2015). We guided the project and dissected the layers and connections of the features using Layder's (1993) "analytical cuts" (p. 108) and research map (Table 1). The research map demonstrates how social realism helped us categorise our information prior to examining it together.

3. Results and discussion

We will discuss our results from the perspective of the "context, setting, situated activity, and self" elements shown above. Firstly, at the **contextual level** is the Japan-Philippines relationship. Students knew almost nothing of the Philippines, despite proximity and a 300-year historical connection. Students noted that school and the media provided little information on this country, confirming Yamada's (2015) report on 1.1% coverage of outer circle countries in Japanese school textbooks. The students also stated they had never thought about and had little interest in the Philippines. Some commented: "I don't know anything about Phillipins [sic] except bananas", and "I never studied anything about Philipines [sic] and it is not in media". However, as the course progressed, the students engaged in research and interacted with the Cebu instructors, developing an interest and positive outlook towards the Philippines, stating, for example, "I didn't know about the Philippine [sic], but I think very interesting" and "I want to go to the Filippins [sic] now". We also confirmed Liddicoat's (2013) claim that Japan focuses on the development of a Japanese identity and unidirectional, outward transmission of Japanese culture. Some student comments that reflect this include: "I was happy I can explain Japanese culture to Philipin [sic] teachers" and "I want to be able to explain Japanese culture to foreigners". The course deliberately attempted to balance this by assigning students to research an aspect of the Philippines.

An important aspect of foreign language education policy in Japan is the concept of *kokusaiika*, literally, 'internationalisation'. Hahn (2018) describes this ironically named policy as "a commitment to neoliberal economic globalization while simultaneously excluding – and taking deliberate steps to prevent – cultural internationalization" (p. 124). At the **setting level**, these policies have underpinned Japanese educational reform for the past 30 years, and are reflected institutionally in the emphasis on presentation practice, Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score improvement, and other business-related skills. This leads to the undervaluation of diversity, creativity, and bidirectional intercultural exchange (Hadley, 2014).

At the **situated activity** level, classroom seating arrangement impacts relationships and the communication that occurs. Japanese school and university classrooms are traditionally arranged with students in separate desks in teacher-facing rows. During this semester-long project, however, students sat in groups, giving them freedom to discuss and organise their research and presentations freely, resulting in a less teacher-centred environment. Despite Filipino teachers' initial concerns about having a native speaker present during the online classes, centralising their role is an explicit goal of the course.

Finally, at the **self** level, we found that, at the end of the course, students became concerned about their L2 development. Questionnaires measuring student anxiety levels showed that, although students exhibited high anxiety over the three-month period, its focus changed. We found that, throughout the course, as they reflected on their activities and growth, their focus shifted from external (peer/instructor judgement/criticism) issues to increased concern over their individual abilities and performance (Healy, Tsubota, & Kudo, 2018).

Holliday (1999) described a “small culture” paradigm (p. 237). Applying this observational tool to any small social grouping allows for a more fluid view of the perpetually evolving ways we interact (culture), and leads the learner away from cultural essentialism (assumptions of an underlying, not objectively observable, group essence). Applied to the classroom and language learning, this is a particularly suitable approach to examining telecollaboration. During this project, a small-culture view emerged and was encapsulated by one of the Filipino instructors who said:

“Everyone participated and asked questions about the Philippines. I was happy to hear from students about ‘the Philippines’ in their presentations. Though they haven’t been to my country yet, they were able to share something about Philippine culture. It’s like we’re creating a ‘knowledge sharing culture’ from students’ presentations”.

4. Conclusions

Using social realist theory, we were able to clarify the complex interplay among cultural, institutional, and individual elements occurring during the telecollaboration, and point to how, in future exchanges, the problematic influences of *kokusaika* and other Japanese education policies may be mitigated by adopting Holliday’s

(1999) ‘small culture’ approach. Japanese educational policies have historically emphasised single directional, business related, and test focused aspects of language learning, and students have been encouraged to observe the world, rather than immerse themselves in it. This works to the detriment of L2 value as a tool of social connection. We were able to document how minor adjustments in emphasis, however, shifted participant perceptions. Our results suggest that telecollaboration positively impacts L2 and intercultural development. We will continue to analyse the above interplay, and will focus on “small culture” community building within telecollaborative exchanges to enable students to develop stronger intercultural connections and awareness.

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