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RESEARCH ONLINE

Getting to know others:
An experience of students of Japanese through online chat sessions[1].

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Abstract

When learning a foreign language, online chat can be used to communicate with native speakers of the target language and to obtain information about that country. Interaction through such a medium often offers the only opportunity for learners to communicate with native speakers, particularly in regional areas where the learning environment provides limited access to the cultural activities and resources on offer in more metropolitan areas. This paper presents an experience of students of Japanese in a regional university through online chat. It examines the information students get to know about Japan and the Japanese and analyses how opinions of their counterparts have been formulated from such a distance and how intercultural understanding has been developed as a result of such activities.

Introduction

Various types of network-based language teaching have been employed in foreign language education in recent years in forms ranging from simple grammar practice to total language learning packages or email exchange to simultaneous online chat. The reason for incorporating such tools into a foreign language curriculum varies from situation to situation.

The aim of this paper is to investigate students' experience in relation to intercultural understanding through participating online chat activities. It is also hoped to demonstrate how network-based language learning can be utilised and contribute to the development of intercultural understanding, through such a medium (ie. online chat). This will be achieved by presenting how some Japanese language students perceive and interpret their experiences of online chat.

Firstly the use of terms "online chat" and "intercultural understanding" are defined. Secondly the state of the studies regarding online chat and intercultural understanding in foreign language education is surveyed. Then the description of the Japanese class for this

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study and the role of online chat in the curriculum are explained. Also what the students say about others (ie. Japanese people, culture, social issues etc,) is presented and analysed in order to explore how intercultural understanding might be developed through online chat activities.

Definition

Firstly, it is important to clarify the terms that this study employs as both online chat and intercultural understanding are defined in various ways (see O'Dowd, 2003 for examples). The term "online chat" used is based on the following definitions.

> Online chat is "real-time, text-based conversation with more than two individuals connected online in an allocated chat room" (Schneider, 2000).

Also it is often referred to as " synchronous computer mediated communication " in the literature and described as "a live (synchronous) conversation through text – similar to normal conversation, only without verbalization" (Freiermuth, 2002: 36). With intercultural understanding, it generally agrees with O'Dowd and Bredella.

O'Dowd states that

> "Intercultural understanding requires from the language learner both an openness to alternative perspectives as well as a critical awareness of the process in which they are involved"(O'Dowd, 2004:39-40).

Also according to Bredella,

> "intercultural understanding means that we can reconstruct the context of the foreign, take the others' perspective and see things through their eyes. This implies that we are able to distance ourselves from our own categories, values and interests" (Bredella, 2002:39, cited in O'Dowd, 2004).

Literature review

In the approach to foreign language teaching, intercultural language teaching started attracting attention when it began to be recognized that the communicative approach (communicative competence) had led to a declining cultural component. The aim of this communicative approach is for learners to achieve a near native speaker level, which led to criticism and thus to a re-examination of the position of culture in language learning (O'Dowd, 2004:22 and Alptekin, 2002).

In Australia, where this study was conducted, a move away from "a focus on the native speaker as the target norm to the focus which should be placed on the `intercultural speaker' as the target for second language teaching and learning" was recognised and a national report regarding intercultural language learning in Australia (eg. how to implement

such learning in a curriculum) was produced in 2003 (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003:11).

The class in this study has also adapted an intercultural language learning approach. This is because in the current learning environment, that is a regional university, students have limited access to the cultural activities and resources and interaction with people of the target language.

The development of intercultural communicative competence and intercultural sensitivity are also important aspects to develop intercultural understanding. Intercultural communicative competence is "the ability to interact effectively in a foreign language with members of cultures different to our own" (Byram, 1997a; Guilherme, 2000, cited in O'Dowd, 2004). With intercultural sensitivity it is the ability "to understand others' behaviour as belonging to a particular cultural context and to view from within that context and not by the learners' own cultural standards" (Bennett, 1993, cited in O'Dowd, 2004). It is, however, very difficult to develop such abilities in the learning environment in question, where actual contact with people of the target language are limited.

The use of online chat is not very new in foreign language education. It has been used to practice "spoken" conversation with people of the target language, exchange cultural and personal information, and conduct a collaborative task (Freiermuth, 2002). Some studies have been conducted with regard to autonomous learning, motivation and characteristics of partners (Liu, Moore, Graham, & Lee, 2002, O'Dowd, 2004 and Saito, 2004). However, the use of online chat in foreign language education has been underdeveloped compared to the use of asynchronous communication tools such as email and discussion boards. It is much less in relation to intercultural understanding. Furthermore, in terms of students' interaction in online chat activities, the available studies often focus on the discourse analysis of actual text-communication (eg. Kitade, 2000, Iwasaki & Oliver, 2003, and Smith, 2003).

Many report that in language learning a mere telecollaboration does not lead to an automatic process to achieve an expected outcome (ie. intercultural understanding) (eg. Ware & Kramsch, 2005 and O'Dowd, 2003). Carefully designed activities, teacher role and reflection through interaction seem to play a very important role in developing intercultural understanding when using such medium (O'Dowd, 2003 and Ware et al., 2005).

Although the primary aim of the online chat sessions in the current curriculum is to apply the language skills learned through out the subject and to communicate with native speakers, the medium could well be beneficial for intercultural understanding if the above issues are taken into consideration. The medium could also be beneficial for such a purpose as "it involves an interactive process which leads to the collaborative construction of knowledge and brings learners to develop an understanding of culture through interaction and

collaboration with others rather than simply through the transmission of facts and figures about the target culture by their instructor" (O'Dowd, 2004:127).

For these reasons, although this study uses online chat, which is synchronous communication, the ability to save the record of discourse enables the learners to reflect on their interaction. It is appropriate, therefore, to look at reflection at tasks that students produce after each chat session rather than merely analysing the actual discourse. Therefor this study focuses on such post-interaction tasks to see the kind of development that occurs. Also it can be considered as a primary project which attempts to link between online chat (simultaneous Computer Mediated Communication) and intercultural understanding by analysing tasks which provide students an opportunity to reflect rather than the discourse analysis of actual text communication.

Position of online chat in curriculum & Class description

Online chat sessions are part of a third year compulsory language subject for the Japanese major at a regional Australian university. The subject usually consists of one hour of kanji (script) lesson and four hours of other language activities. For an average of five sessions per term, one of the grammar hours is replaced with a chat session. These third year students participate in this simultaneous chat program and communicate interactively with students of English at a university in Japan once a week for sixty minutes over a five-week period.

A platform, "eclass" created and managed by the Japanese university is used for the class. The platform provides six virtual chat rooms. The students are divided into rooms by instructors from both universities in advance. Three to four students from both universities occupy each room.

Once students have logged-in, they go to their allocated "chat" rooms. They then "talk" to their chat partners using the keyboard. Students can see in real time what their chat partners write, as their responses immediately appear on screen. They are required to "discuss" a different set topic for each session and complete a group task collaboratively. The language of communication is both Japanese and English. If a group starts conversing in English, then they should switch to Japanese after half an hour or vice versa.

Mutually agreed discussion topics and collaborative tasks are set by both instructors prior to the chat sessions. These topics include subjects such as: self-introduction; how to learn a foreign language; one's own values and the use of keego (honorific and humble forms of Japanese language). On the topic of keego, the students in Australia prepare a "keego quiz" to ask the students in Japan about the use of keego and their thoughts on keego. The students are not assessed on their grammatical accuracy during these chat sessions.

The conversation is free-flowing with the supervising language teacher acting as a resource for understanding and writing. The students are able to save and print out their chat sessions through the platform.

As for assessment tasks, students are required to complete three tasks; a 400-ji summary of each online chat session in Japanese (weekly summary), self-reflection of one's own performance, and an 800-ji report on the overall experience of chat sessions in Japanese (final report).

The students submit the tasks at the end of the last session. These tasks are used to present what the students say about others (ie. Japanese people, culture, social issues etc,) and how the students perceive and interpret their experiences of online chat and to explore how intercultural understanding can be developed through such online chat activities.

Data

The following selected excerpts from the student tasks were collected in 2005.
The first three excerpts are on keego (polite forms of Japanese language). The students have been studying it since the 1st year of their Japanese major. They have also read about such issues as why keego exists, what young Japanese people say about it and so on. However, the general consensus of the students on keego is that it is too difficult to acquire as there is no obvious equivalent to it in English and also there are too few opportunities to practice it in their daily life. The excerpts are student's reflections on the topic of keego after chat sessions. Each excerpt is presented in its unaltered form[2] (with English translations at appropriate junctures).

Excerpt 1 (Student J05 from Final Report)
日本語の敬語について話した。日本の文化は敬語が大切なことだと思う。日本の若い人たちもそう思うそうだ。しかし、たくさんの若い人たちは敬語をする事があまり好きじゃなくて、難しい事だと思うそうだ。この矛盾は面白いと思う。私も敬語は難しい事と思って、ゆりさんとゆみさんの表現した考えをわかれたと思う。
[We talked about Japanese honorific language/polite language. I think that polite language is important in Japanese culture. It seems that Japanese young people think so too. However, many of them appear to not like using polite language much and think it is difficult. I think this contradiction is interesting. I also think that polite language is difficult and understood the thoughts that Yuri and Yumi expressed.]

Excerpt 2 (Student J05 from Weekly Summary)

[2] All participant names are pseudonyms.

ゆみさんは敬語がなくなったら良くないと思ったそうで、文化の大切な部分だと言っても、ゆみさんの弱点だと言った。私は敬語がとても難しいことだからと思う。日常生活のために敬語が必要じゃないから日本人の若い人達はだんだん使わなくなっていると思う。でも、私も敬語が日本の大切な部分だと思う。

[Yumi thinks that it is not good to forget polite language and says that it is an important part of culture. But having said that, Yumi says polite language is her weakness. I think this is because polite language is very difficult. I think that young Japanese people are gradually not using polite language as it is not necessary in daily life but I also think polite language is an important part of Japanese culture.]

The Excerpts 1 and 2 came from the same student. She demonstrates her understanding of the reasons why keego is difficult from the partner's perspective and draws a new conclusion on the topic.

Excerpt 3 (Student K05 from Final Report)

敬語についての会話もすごくおもしろくて、日本人が小学校の時から正式に敬語を勉強することを知って、日本人にも分かりにくくて、正確に使っている人は少ないらしい。それが私にとってかなりのびっくりで、同情できることで安心した。そのため、これから私が敬語を使おうとする時にそんなに緊張しないと思う。

[The conversation on polite language was very interesting. I came to know that Japanese people formally start studying it at primary school. It is difficult to understand even for Japanese people and it seems that there are not many people who can use it correctly. It was rather a shock to me and I was relieved as it is something I can sympathise with. Therefore I think that I will not be so nervous using polite language from now on.]

This excerpt also shows a change in her perspective on the topic by saying "I will not be so nervous using polite language from now on."

The next excerpt is not about keego but the student is referring to an incident in a chat session and tries to understand it from a different perspective.

Excerpt 4 (Student N05 from Weekly Summary).

ともみさんに、「将来は自分の好きな職業をしたいと思っていますか。」に聞かれて、はじめに読んで意味があまり分からなかった。私がはじめに「好きじゃなかったら、なぜその仕事をするか。」と考えていたが、そして本の意味が分かった。好

きじゃない職業をなぜする理由は両親のえいきょうなどのためである。みわさんが日本人の中で好きな仕事ができる人が少なさそうと言って、面白かったと思った。
[Tomomi asked me "in future do you want to have a job you like?" At first I did not understand exactly what she meant. Initially I thought "if you do not like the job why would you do it" but I came to know the real reason. Due to the influence of one's parents and so forth there are cases when the job you do is not necessarily the one you like. Miwa said that among Japanese people it seems that not so many people have a job they like and I found this interesting.]

At the beginning Bredella's definition was introduced as "intercultural understanding means that we can reconstruct the context of the foreign, take the others' perspective and see things through their eyes" (2002:39). Excerpt 4 is a clear example of intercultural understanding as the student reconstructed the context of the foreign (ie. "to have a job you like"), took the chat partner's perspective (ie. "not so many people have a job they like") and saw things through her eyes (ie. "Due to the influence of one's parents and so forth there are cases when the job you do is not necessarily the one you like").

The following excerpt comes from a student's self-evaluation and he explains his disappointment at not being able to use the casual form and Kansai-ben dialect. He attempts to analyse the reasons from the target culture's point of view.

Excerpt 5 (Student N05 from Self-evaluation)
"Unfortunately, this was the final Y-talk *(chat)* session. I very much enjoyed meeting Tomomi-san and having her teach me a little bit more about Japanese culture week by week. I must say that I find the fact that we were still using polite speech, even after 6 weeks of getting to know each other, a little bit odd. I would have thought that such a lengthy period of time would constitute swapping to a more casual and friendlier tone of speech. I considered the fact that the 後輩—先輩 *(junior and senior)* relationship might be the reason for remaining polite, but I think that we are both the same age, so it can't be that. It has no bearing on her personality whatsoever, but I just find it unusual.

I was also looking forward to having Tomomi-san teach me some Kansai-ben, since I am greatly interested in it, but again, this could only really occur once we began speaking in a more casual tone of voice." (*Italics* were added by the author.)

Summary of Data

These excerpts have demonstrated some sense of the students' openness, the reflective process the students went through and the process which has lead to the development of an alternative perspective by trying to see things through another person's perspective.

Discussion & Future direction

The online chat activities and tasks presented above certainly show that there is a place for interaction and reflection as important parts of the development of intercultural understanding. The excerpts demonstrate that the students exhibit important characteristics of an interculturally competent person. While this competence is promising, some characteristics were absent from the students' work. For example, there is no mention of what they thought of their own culture and how their culture might be perceived by their chat-mates. According to O'Dowd (2004) this process of awareness of one's own cultural mores is also important in order to see their own culture more critically and develop intercultural understanding. The lack of reflection on one's own culture might indicate and confirm the notion of much research in language learning that the use of Computer Mediated Communication with the people of the target culture does not automatically lead to the development of intercultral understanding (eg. Ware et al., 2005 and O'Dowd, 2001). In addition, although there is no known developmental sequence as to which reflection should happen first, it is perhaps that the target culture might be more significant to the students than their own is at this level or in this interaction. In future, this aspect can be further researched to see if any differences occur. Furthermore, the lack of reflection also confirms the role of the teacher who "cannot assume students will have the skills to utilise telecollaboration opportunities for successful learning" (eg. Ware et al., 2005 and O'Dowd, 2001). Although the teacher's role in this study was to act as a resource for understanding and writing it might be necessary to take a more active role in helping students in analysing the discourse.

There is also an issue of the level of intercultural understanding. It is true that a few of the summaries and reports produced by the students did not present any trace of reflection. Some students simply stated what was said in the conversation with a minor impression such as "my partner said A and I said B and it was fun." This could be due to the level of their Japanese, which prevented them from expressing what they really wanted to say. For further study, it might therefore be worthwhile to employ a follow up interview or questionnaire to determine this aspect. The outcomes of such an interview would hopefully reveal the true level of awareness and provide the necessary measures to improve the curriculum to accommodate such students.

To sum up, this primary study has explained how online chat is incorporated into a Japanese language class and what the students say about Japanese people, culture, and social

issues through online chat activities in their reflective tasks. It has also demonstrated benefits of using online chat for intercultural understanding and how intercultural understanding could be further developed through online chat activities.

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