

Learning Culture through Online Communication

A Case Study of an Intercultural Exchange Program between Turkey and Japan

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to clarify what and how students learn culture through online communication based on a case study of the intercultural exchange program between Turkish and Japanese students. At the same time, the authors will pay attention to the consequences by comparing two different types of online communication-synchronous and asynchronous tools. As a result of the data analysis, at least three findings are clarified. Firstly, exchanging local and personal stories allowed us to get closer to each other psychologically. Secondly, there was a difference in interpretation about the speed in responding and silence that lasted while during the chatting. Thirdly, focusing on the differences between cultures allowed us to realize how much we unconsciously are dipped into “culture”.

Keywords: Online communication, Intercultural understandings, Cultural difference, CMC

RESEARCH BACKGROUNDS

Since ICT are well equipped in higher education, students can have more possibilities for contact with people from different cultures. In such a learning environment, various kinds of international collaborative learning projects have been conducted (Kishi, 2016). Students living in far distance can meet, chat, know, perceive and interact with one another through the Internet.

Students are, so-called, digital native, and familiar with using the Internet. They daily communicate with their friends through Social Network Service (SNS) such as Facebook, LINE, Instagram, and Twitter, and get used to using these kinds of communication tools. However, they, in general, use these tools among the people like close friends that they well know each other. In other words, they do not have enough experience to meet up with people from a different culture through the Internet.

Besides, students are guided to communicate smoothly in the well-designed environments whose objective, resources and tools are prepared in advance by an instructor to avoid conflict among the cultures. It is, however, important to let students find objective, tools, and resources by themselves by interacting with

one another (KISHI, 2016). Therefore, in this research, the authors conducted an intercultural collaborative learning project that students by themselves set up objectives, select communication tools, and resources to learn culture from one another.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this research is to clarify what and how students learn culture through online communication based on a case study of the intercultural exchange program between Turkish and Japanese students. All activities were supposed to be created by students by themselves through interacting one another. At the same time, the authors will pay attention to the consequences by comparing with two types of online communication tools.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, 16 students from Meiji University (Japan) and 16 students from Gaziantep University (Turkey) had participated from May to August 2018.

Outline of the practice

To begin with, connecting students from each university who participated in this activity, students

used Facebook to make an online group so that they could share the announcements, instructions or some requests from each side. Then, to clarify what students learn from people from different cultural backgrounds through online communication, students used two different types of online communication tools, one is text chatting of SNS such as Messenger and WhatsApp, and the other is a video conference. In the first a few weeks, students communicate through SNS text chatting by the pair, and in the next a few weeks, students interact with the newly arranged pair according to the common interest.

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors employed the questionnaires and interviews after the respective activities.

In the questionnaire, the authors asked the following questions: 1. *Discovering different cultures*; Since this is one of the primary purposes of this activity, the authors confirmed if the students achieved cultural discovery, 2. *Enjoyment of interaction*; Enjoyment is one of the most powerful motivations to continue to learn together, and 3. *Psychological distances to Turkey*; It is said that ICT let people in the distance feel closer to one another. Psychological distances can also be a key to promote students to learn different culture.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Learning Culture through text chatting

In the first activity, the students made a pair based on the introduction videos on the Facebook group and started communication with SNS to know each other.

As a result of questionnaire, 7 out of 16 students discovered a different culture through SNS text chatting. These students said, "We could have some good conversations about culture of each side. Especially because the pair had a strong emotion or interests in Japanese culture such as anime, movie and history, it was easy to start a conversation and expand it to the next stage"

On the other hands, 6 out of 16 students showed negative aspects on discovering different culture because of the difference in motivation. One of those 6 students said that "I could not find anything motivated me to go further than just having small talks because there was the gap of interests between my pair and me." This difference in interests of each pair had not been turned out until students started having the text messaging. These problems about their motivations were reported as a reflection after this activity had been finished. However, 8 out of 16 participants enjoyed the interactions at the same time. Even though there is a difficulty in digging into a conversation about the cultural differences, they found it fun to talk with people in other countries. This result shows that having the intercultural

interaction have at least some effects on the motivation of the participants or can be a stimulus to them. 7 out of 16 students who participated in this text-messaging activity said they somehow got inspired by interacting with different culture or perceived what their own culture in a way that their pairs asked about or pointed out their culture. As whole reaction to the first activity, text messaging, students enjoyed their conversations and noticed some cultural differences. But there were no further findings from it. This limited result shows that not setting the topic of the conversation and the experience of international interaction that most of Meiji students have already gained had bad effects on the motivation of students to deepen their talking about further cultural difference.

Learning Culture through video chatting

After the text chatting, three students started video calling. In the video calling, they talked about their own culture, trends, and habits in their daily lives. As a result of the questionnaire we had, they could have a good conversation. However, the students figured out several bad points or problems of video calling. According to the survey, 2 issues emerged through video calling. Firstly, all three students answered that they had language problems. They communicated with their pairs in English, so they sometimes stopped talking because they had no idea how to express what they wanted to say. Secondly, 2 of 3 students said that there was a time lag between Japan and Turkey. For this reason, it got difficult for some students to find the time they can do video calling. On the other hand, there were 3 points that the students paid attention to so as to have a smooth and meaningful conversation. At first, they avoided the topic which is personal such as their specific religion or politics and their taboos. Second, they tried to respond as soon as they can. When the conversation stopped, it became difficult to restart the conversation. Therefore, many students paid attention to it. Third, they used "how" and "why" questions to deepen their understanding of the culture of their pairs. Those question also helped them avoid making silence during the conversation. As whole reaction to the video calling, the students purely enjoyed it. However, there were more problems than text messaging. Because of those issues, students seemed to be conscious not to stop communication. Consequently, students needed to set the topic of what they were supposed to talk about in advance. Besides, they also needed to find the way how to avoid silence during the conversation and how to deal with it.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis, there are, at least, three things found as common throughout the two different online communication. Firstly, talking about local topics gave students a psychological attachment to each

other. Secondly, there was a difference in interpreting a period of silence and their quickness in responding between each pair. Thirdly, focusing on the cultural difference made students realize how much each of them was unconsciously affected by their own culture.

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