

Implementation of Intercultural Telecollaborative Exchanges

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Abstract

The 2012 telecollaborative exchange project delivered multiple activities for nine weeks based primarily on Moodle, with the educational goals of motivating students to interact inter-culturally, and developing their cultural awareness. 40 students from a language class in China and from a seminar class in Japan participated. This project, conducted mainly in Japanese, was intended also to meet different learning needs of both Chinese learners of Japanese and Japanese students studying cross-cultural communication. Using Moodle gives us opportunities and the participants were engaged in weekly tasks using Forum, Choice, NanoGong, PowerPoint slides and Skype video calls, which were arranged to offer both inter-class interactions and small-group discussions within a mixed group of students from both classes. This project yielded some positive results in terms of the educational/learning goals, though more active participation should be encouraged. Some of the Moodle functionalities, used in combination with other tools, worked fine and helped raise students' motivation in this exchange project, while others did not work as planned or expected by the authors, which will lead to a modified approach to the following project. This presentation evaluates this 2012 attempt based on the participants' feedback and output, and their behaviors observed on Moodle and in class, and explores ways to maximize future intercultural telecollaboration via Moodle.

Keywords

Intercultural Exchange, telecollaboration, Moodle

Introduction

In 2012, the first attempt was made to use Moodle as the platform for a telecollaborative project between students from a Japanese language class in China and a seminar class for intercultural communication in Japan. 18 Chinese and 22 Japanese students participated in this nine-week project. While many collaborative projects focus on language exchange (Carney, 2006), this project was intended to provide opportunities with different focuses; for Chinese students to be exposed to authentic communication in their target language, and for Japanese students to experience authentic interaction with people from other cultures. Our common educational goals were to motivate students to participate in intercultural interactions, and to develop their cultural awareness. The purpose of this presentation is to show how successful this project was to each side, and how Moodle, along with Skype, could be used to facilitate intercultural communication.

Implementation Overview

The 2011 project tried to use a blog, which posed significant challenges (Yamauchi & Jones, 2012). This led us to realise the importance of platform stability and choose Moodle as the platform for this 2012 attempt, where discussion forums were mainly used. The project was divided into three stages of building relationships (Skype session and sharing self-introduction slides within a mixed group of 6 to 7 learners; weeks 1 to 3), themed discussions (questions and answers about two key topics; weeks 4 to 8), and reflection (Skype session; week 9). Separate forums (topic-based; group/class-based) were set up to help participants easily follow different tasks, whose sequencing, as O'Dowd and Ritter (2006) points out, is among the key factors for successful communication in telecollaborative projects. Forums for socialisation were also provided to encourage students' engagement outside of the group. The following Moodle features were utilized to promote active participation in these Forum activities: the groups and groupings were used to create mixed groups of Chinese and Japanese

students; a set of Choice activities to identify cultural differences were prepared as pre-discussion activities; voice messages using NanoGong were included to help students feel closer to each other.

Results and Discussion

Of the Moodle functionalities expected to be helpful, the group and groupings did not work as expected due to a misunderstanding of the grouping function. The pre-discussion Choice activities worked well. For Chinese students Choice activities successfully raised the understanding of the topic of the semester which was the Inter-personal communication (average of 4.3 on the 6-point scale of agreement). For Japanese students, the Choice activities helped them start discussions, and also provided data to be used in their comparative essays, which linked this project to their course content. However, it would be more effective to use the Feedback activity (or other survey tool) for comparison between the two universities. NanoGong did not work very well because of equipment problems. Also, processing voice messages without other clues turned out to be more challenging than expected. The Skype sessions, despite a connection problem, increased students' interest, encouraging interaction, raising awareness of how miscommunication might happen, and be avoided or repaired.

The course statistics revealed that there were a total of 1207 posts, with an average of 29.4 posts per student during the nine-week project. This figure may look good, but some posts received no replies, and some replies asking for details or clarification were left unanswered. This may have been caused by setting up too many separate Forums, and we plan to use fewer forums to see if that will make a difference. The statistics also showed there were more than 10,000 Forum views, 8.6 times more than the number of posts, indicating that the learners were actually quite interested in these activities. This suggests we should seek ways to facilitate students' active participation.

Inter-personal communication was the Chinese students' main semester topic and this telecollaborative project provided another avenue for getting information directly from native Japanese speakers. In addition, this exchange project was the opportunity to not only develop their Japanese abilities, but also explore the process of transmission. The survey revealed little relationship building with their counterparts, which led to discontinued communication after the semester, even though during the project most of them communicated enthusiastically.

For the intercultural communication class, this was the first attempt to integrate a telecollaborative project into the course syllabus, yielding positive impacts on the students but leaving much to be improved in the course design. The students' posts and final essays, as well as in-class discussions, indicated that this project helped them realize what intercultural communication feels like, and that they might need communication skills training to effectively communicate with someone they do not know very well.

Conclusions

Although we are not ready to fully judge how Moodle can be used to help our telecollaborative project since we have not yet maximized its benefits, the combination of themed discussions, each with a pre-discussion topic-related survey, and Skype sessions have shown to be promising. Our continuing project will focus on how collaborative work can encourage cross-cultural communication and help build an e-learning community.

References

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