CREATING AN EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH ONLINE JAPANESE LANGUAGE EXCHANGES: -- HOW IT IS DONE AND WHAT IT TAKES --

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Purpose

to provide opportunities for all students regardless of their international experience/background to develop intercultural- and international-competence through Japanese language instruction

*Intercultural competence: The ability to communicate across cultures

Structure of the presentation

1. Background
2. Purpose
3. Questions to be answered
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Questions to be answered

1) What do the students from different countries gain from this kind of exchange?
2) What can teachers do to make the students feel comfortable in seminars and meetings in order to maximize learning?
3) What processes are necessary for successful online exchanges with overseas students?

Earlier studies

• Byram (1997, 2009) IC/ICC model
  i.e. 5 savoirs (=know how to)
  'knowledge' (savoir)
  'interpreting/relating skills' (savoir comprendre)
  'discovery/interaction skills' (savoir apprendre/faire)
  'attitudes' (savoir être)
  'critical cultural awareness' (savoir s’engager)

• Liaw (2006) awareness of one’s own culture

• Saito (2011) creating a safe learning environment plurilingualism/pluriculturalism
  connecting teachers/institutions

Background

• In recent years, both the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education or Högskoleverket (HSV) and individual universities in Sweden have been promoting ‘internationalization at home.’
• Incorporating development of intercultural competence in various courses has also been an important focal point of university education especially in the area of foreign language instruction. (Byram 1997)
• It is often said that it is difficult for students to develop intercultural competence without an opportunity to study abroad or without having international students in the classroom. (Tyberg 2009 etc.)
• Dalarna University is one of the leading universities in Sweden that offers real-time online courses, especially in the area of foreign languages.
Method
(Project 1: The U.S. – Sweden)

Period: 2012 spring term

Subjects:
- Gettysburg College (USA):
  All 7 students taking JPR304 “Language and Identity” Advanced Reading, Composition, and Conversation (intermediate – advanced level)
- Dalarna University (Sweden):
  3 volunteer students from JP2002 Introduction to Linguistics (intermediate – advanced level)

Method:
- Blogs (entries and comments)
- Joint online seminars 90 min x 2
- Post seminar surveys x 2

Method
(Project 2: Korea - China - Sweden)

Period: 2012 spring term, 2012 autumn term, 2013 spring term

Subjects:
- Students in intermediate - advanced level, five teachers from
  - Pusan National University (South Korea)
  - Busan University of Foreign Studies (South Korea)
  - Donghua University (China)
  - Dalarna University (Sweden)

(Project 1: 17 volunteer students, 21 volunteer students, 41 students)

Method:
- SkyDrive (short essays) & Adobe Connect/Skype (Students’ online sessions) during 6-8 weeks
- Reflection sheet (Furikaeri sheet) after every session
- Post seminar surveys
- Discussions in the seminars (2013 spring term)

Positive Findings

- Students expanded their horizons and gained new perspectives by discussing various topics with students who share the same interest (=Japanese)
- Positive effects on students taking an interest in countries they originally did not have any interest in
- Students feel less stress speaking Japanese with other non-native speakers than they do when speaking with native speakers.

Raised Issues

- It may take a longer period than just one term to build good relationships
- It is important to clarify the purpose as we had some complaints from a few participants
  Students who go into the project hoping only to gain Japanese language skills (grammar/vocabulary etc.) quickly become unsatisfied with the exchange.
- If it is to be part of the course work, the topics to be discussed in the project should be closely related to the course content

Systems used

- Connect
- Blogger
- Skype
- SkyDrive
- Facebook

Web conferencing system
(Adobe® Connect™)
Mandatory vs. Volunteer participation

Pros and Cons of volunteer participation:

+ Those who volunteer are enthusiastic and actively participated in the exchange
- Only a few students are interested in participating
- If the teacher personally does not know the student, it is difficult to measure his/her language skills, personality, etc.
- Volunteers also tend to disappear in the middle of the project
- It is difficult to make meaningful connections between the course content and the activities in the online international exchange

Teachers’ role

- Providing a safe learning environment for the students
  e.g. Preparing them to get to know each other prior to the actual face to face meeting / choice of topics (from shallow to deep)
- Clarifying the purpose of the exchanges clearly to the participating students
- Assisting with activities and the choice of topics to be discussed
- Help solving miscommunication problems
- Trust and a good relationship between the teachers are also important for successful exchanges

Answers to the questions

1. What do the students from different countries gain from this kind of exchange?
   - Identifying with each other
   - Avoiding stereotypes
   - No inferiority complex resulting in more active interaction
   - Sense of belonging
   - Critical reflection on one’s culture as well as use of Japanese language
   - Improved communicative skills in Japanese through real conversation
   - Expanding one’s horizons and perspectives of other cultures
   - Learning from each other’s different vocabulary repertoire → increase in number of vocabulary

Answers to the questions (cont.)

2. What can teachers do to make the students feel comfortable in seminars and meetings in order to maximize learning?
   - The purpose of the exchange needs to be explained clearly to the participants
   - Teachers from each institution need to communicate closely and openly (It is important for teachers from each institution to share the same purpose)
   - The teacher needs to know his/her students (ability/personality) well
   - Matching up students with similar language ability
   - Help students from different institutions get acquainted before the initial meeting
   - Teachers need to choose topics and the content of activities carefully to maximize students learning
   - Breaking students into smaller groups (2-3 students per group)
   - Provide a longer period for discussion
   - The teacher needs to be aware of any problems during the exchange and assist in resolving those problems.

Answers to the questions (cont.)

3. What processes are necessary for successful online exchanges with overseas students?

Finding partner institution(s)/teacher(s):
   - Acquaintances
   - Making contacts at international conferences and workshops
   - Communicate closely and openly

Selecting participating students:
   - Level (needs to be matched)
   - Volunteer vs. Mandatory (problems with time difference, family/work situation, different academic terms)
   - Teacher should know the participating students ability and personality well

Systems:
   - Use of readily available systems (google+, skype, skydrive, dropbox, facebook, etc.)
   - Synchronous (online video conferencing, online chat) vs. Asynchronous (email, blog, etc.) or Combination of both?

Answers to the questions (cont.)

3. What processes are necessary for successful online exchanges with overseas students? (cont.)

Planning:
   - Period (need to consider different academic terms in different countries)
   - Frequency (more often the better)
   - Size (smaller group discussions – deeper relationship)
   - Topic (depends on the participants’ background / group combination; needs to be suitable for the purpose of exchange)
   - Activities (should incorporate both language skills as well as sharing one’s own perspectives)
   - Finding the right balance between students’ autonomous learning and teacher’s support
Conclusion

Changes in the students’ perspectives regarding their self-identity and others’ identities.

- Stereotypes → realization of:
  - Identity = various, multiple, fluid nature
  - Difference → Similarity / Acceptance of differences

- Connection between language and society
- Critical thinking
- Life-long learning

Problems with Byram’s IC model

- The model is too theoretical – it is difficult to know exactly how to actually implement it in the classroom
- The definition of what is ‘culture’, itself, is troublesome for the teachers (Byram: culture = national culture)
- Components of this model have hardly anything to do with language and also ignore the nature of communication itself such as the relational, interactional and developmental aspects (Matsuo, 2012)
- Difficult to assess

The final words

Through these types of exchanges, the students can gain not only Japanese skills, but also expand their horizons and deepen their understanding of another culture as well as of the topics discussed during the meetings through interactions with university students from other countries who study Japanese at the same level.

The success of this project demonstrates a great potential in internet-based university education contributing to ‘internationalization at home’ and ‘improvement of intercultural competence’ for everyone.

Not every student has the opportunity to study abroad, but today’s technology allows every student to experience intercultural communication in a classroom setting.

References


Thank you!

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