

Learner's Development of Intercultural Competence in Cross-Cultural Distance Learning

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to measure possible effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) on the development of learners' intercultural competence. Initiated by Waseda University in 1999, CCDL has offered collaborative joint cyber sessions among Asian universities. CCDL is designed to offer participants opportunities to develop not only English skills, but also other skills they need in order to communicate with people from different countries. The latter ones include skills to cope with cultural differences and to manage the conversation well, which overlap significant elements of intercultural competence. Focusing on CCDL at Waseda University, this study investigates which aspects of intercultural competence are likely to develop through the programme. Pre and post questionnaires with 24 items elicited from Byram's model of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997) were distributed to 68 Waseda University students enrolled in CCDL classes for the fall semester in 2011. Of the 24 items they assessed, significant positive development was found in the items related to cultural comparison. The results suggest that CCDL works positively in the development of intercultural awareness and understanding.

Keywords

Cross-Cultural Distance Learning, Intercultural competence, Intercultural communication

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of distance learning

Distance learning has become increasingly popular over the last two decades in language education (Jouregi, Graaff, Bergh, and Kriz, 2012). It enables students to communicate synchronously or asynchronously with foreign language learners elsewhere as well as with native speakers. As a result of the developments in networked communication technologies, foreign language learners have the opportunity to break down the

confines of traditional face-to-face classroom settings and to gain access to target languages and cultures in ever more varied ways (Hauck and Youngs, 2008: 88-89). Culture being hard to be taught implicitly in the traditional classroom settings, potential of distance learning has drawn much attention. Together with the linguistic benefit, the potential increase in the participants' intercultural competence is seen as the main attraction of distance learning (Hauck and Youngs: 89, O'Dowd and Ritter, 2006: 624).

1.2 CCDL at Waseda University

Waseda University has run Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) since 1999. CCDL enables students at Waseda to interact with students in other Asian countries through *Live On*, a web-based conference system that can be accessed from anywhere in the world. Through the actual interactions with other Asian students, participants are expected to be aware of cultures of their interlocutors as well as their own, finding differences and similarities between them. CCDL is a half-year course, divided into 3 phases; Preparation Classes, Joint Classes, and Post Joint Classes. Intercultural discussions are conducted in the Joint Classes, normally from 5 to 7 times.

2 Previous studies

Indeed, research on distance learning and its effectiveness in foreign language education has been reported. Park and Nakano (2003) analysed linguistic development of the CCDL participants, concluding that participants come to acquire skills to interact, negotiate, and solve miscommunication problems, using various communication strategies. Tudini (2007) investigated chat rooms of 27 learners and 118 native speakers of Italian, which proved that learners' autonomy is improved through self-initiated negotiations in the intercultural interactions.

However, not enough research has been conducted as to cultural learning outcomes,

compared to language fluency and autonomy (Kern, 2002). Furthermore, how online contact actually contributes to intercultural learning remains unclear (O'Dowd, 2007). Therefore, this study focuses on cultural outcomes of distance learning, investigating which aspects of intercultural competence are likely to develop through CCDL.

3 Method

In order to examine the aspects of intercultural competence that are likely to develop, pre and post questionnaires were distributed to the participants of CCDL in the fall semester of 2011, asking them to assess their own level of intercultural competence before and after conducting 4 or 5 cyber sessions with their respective partner universities. 24 items on the questionnaire were elicited from Byram's model of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997), which was adopted as the definition of intercultural competence in this study. The 24 items were designed to reflect the 5 main components of Byram's model of intercultural competence; *attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness*. The 68 participants were asked to choose a number from 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest) for each item that most closely describes the level of their self-assessment.

4 Results

The results of the pre-questionnaire showed that *attitudes* scored the highest average ($M=4.69$, $SD=1.10$) while *skills of interpreting and relating* scored the lowest ($M=3.32$, $SD=1.15$). It turned out that the participants relatively had positive attitudes to the interaction with their partner university students from the start. On the other hand, they assessed lower for the items that require knowledge or understanding of their interlocutor's culture.

The results of the pre-questionnaire were then compared to those of post-questionnaires so as to identify which items showed positive development after the experience of the cyber sessions. Sign test revealed that 7 of the 24 items showed significant difference in their self-assessment; knowledge on interlocutor's culture, awareness of possible misunderstandings, knowledge on the characteristics of interlocutor's English, skills to explain how their interlocutor's and their views are different, skills to identify areas of misunderstanding and explain their causes, skills to discover differences between their and their interlocutor's cultures, and skills to discover their similarities. These items, therefore, turned out to be the items that are likely to develop through the intercultural interactions on the CCDL programme.

5 Discussions

In the survey conducted before and after the cyber sessions, positive development was found in the items related to comparison between one's own country and his or her interlocutors'. The results of this study suggest that participants are likely to discover similarities and differences in the process of finding new aspects of their interlocutors' culture, which can further deepen the understanding of possible misunderstanding between them.

Considering that one of the purposes of distance learning is to deepen learners' cross-cultural knowledge and skills in its interactive learning environments, CCDL performs at a sufficient level in that the participants of the programme assessed their awareness and skills related to cultural comparison highly after the cyber sessions. However, micro-level observation of their actual interactions is required in order to indicate possible factors that can contribute to their development of the particular aspects of intercultural competence.

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