

Here and There: An Authentic Online Orientation Program

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Students preparing for study abroad often find themselves facing unknowns, not only about study but also about the basics of life in a foreign country. The ubiquity of Internet-mediated communication tools provides a useful forum for relieving this anxiety through communication with faculty at the destination school prior to departure. Faculty and graduate students at Chubu University and its sister school in the United States, Ohio University, collaborated to create a pilot orientation program to prepare Japanese students for study abroad, connecting them directly with faculty at Ohio University. The course used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online communication and a variety of pedagogical tools, focused around a Moodle website and the use of Skype. Students had firsthand, real-time access to information about all aspects of their upcoming experience. In this paper I describe the planning, implementation, and outcomes of the course, with an eye towards future improvement.

留学準備中の学生は、勉学のことのみならず、外国生活の基本についてもわからないことが多数ある。インターネット媒体のコミュニケーション・ツールの遍在は、出発前に留学先の学校の職員とのコミュニケーションを通して不安の軽減ができるという、学生にとって有益な場所を提供している。日本人学生の留学のためのオリエンテーション・プログラムの作成と実施を行い、留学先大学の職員と直接つながりを持てるようにした。そのコースは、ムードルを中心にスカイプも使用し、オンライン・コミュニケーションの同期性と非同期性の組み合わせ、さまざまな教育上のツールを用いた。授業から寮生活、そして大学のあらゆる市の情報まで、学生は経験するすべての側面について、リアルタイムで直接、情報にアクセスすることができた。この報告は、そのコースの計画、実施、結果について、管理上また指導上の問題に焦点をあて、このコースの改善を見据えて記したものである。

STUDENTS TAKING part in study-abroad programs face a host of challenges both inside and outside the classroom: a new academic environment, unfamiliar living conditions in a foreign country, and culture and language issues. In addition, they often have only a short period of time in which to come to terms with and overcome these issues. To help ease these transitions, many study abroad programs offer predeparture orientation programs, and their value in preparing students to meet the challenges they will face is well understood (Martin, 1989).

However, predeparture orientations are, necessarily, held in the students' home country, for students who have mostly never been abroad. This can make discussion of potential cross-cultural problems a fairly abstract question, as the students have no real-world experience to draw upon. Many excellent training materials have been developed to help bridge this gap



between theory and reality. Two of the more well known, and used as part of Chubu University's predeparture orientation until quite recently, are (a) BaFa BaFa, a cultural simulation activity in which participants role-play different cultural values and see how they interact, and (b) Barnga, in which participants learn a game and are placed, unknowingly, in groups whose participants have all learned slightly different rules.

The effectiveness of this sort of training material is generally accepted (Petersen, Glover, Romero, & Romero, 1978) but the activities tend to be somewhat abstract. As a result, drawing connections between student experiences with these activities and potential real situations they may face during their study abroad can be difficult—especially if the training is being conducted in the students' second language (Carroll, 1997). The challenge of real understanding and analysis of activities such as these in the EFL context is one of the factors that led Chubu University to investigate other options for predeparture orientation. The new reality of an increasingly interconnected world and, above all, the ubiquity of free, easy-to-use Internet communication tools opens exciting new possibilities in orientation which are, as yet, only beginning to be explored.

In this paper I will describe the design and adoption of a pilot online predeparture orientation program for 1st-year students at Chubu University in Japan preparing for a 4-month study abroad course at Ohio University in the United States. I will present and discuss the challenges in the design and implementation of the course, and how those challenges will be met in a second pilot and eventual full implementation of the program.

The Online Orientation Program

Foundations and Design

Chubu University and Ohio University have a long-standing relationship, with reciprocal study exchange programs between them

for more than 20 years. Chubu University sends a large cohort of exchange students to Ohio University every year for a 4-month period. Students participating in the study abroad program receive active support from graduates of Ohio University working at Chubu University, both Japanese and foreign. In all, it is a mature program with a robust support and orientation system.

Ohio University's Department of Linguistics and Intensive English Program are, traditionally, only directly involved once the students reach the United States, but in recent years the Linguistics department has developed a strong CALL focus. The creation of this online orientation program was suggested as a way to supplement the Japanese students' orientation experience with authentic communication with interlocutors at Ohio University, while providing important real-world course design and teaching experience to graduate students in Ohio University's MA program. Instruction and website design and creation were all carried out by these MA students, under supervision from Ohio University and Chubu University faculty.

The online orientation program was designed to introduce four main categories of the foreign exchange experience at Ohio University: life in a small town in the United States, dormitory life, making friends in the United States, and academic life. Information was presented in each category to help prepare the students for the transition to life in an American university, while providing supplementary English language activities to help develop students' communicative skills and activate relevant vocabulary. The information was presented through video, audio, and text in order to improve both listening and reading comprehension.

During the course of the program, the participating students were given opportunities to interact with their instructors both synchronously, via video conferencing, and asynchronously, through a discussion forum. Throughout the program, the instructors provided guidance for the students and made them-

selves available to help introduce and clarify the topics, as well as answer any questions that the students had. In addition to helping the students navigate the program and learn about Ohio University and Athens, Ohio (the town it is situated in), the instructors served as English language tutors for the students.

Aspects of the Online Course

The course was hosted on a standard Moodle website. It was focused around two basic types of material: authentic web resources and instructor-created content, both supported with quizzes hosted on the Moodle website, surveys, and structured forum discussion activities. As noted above, they were organized around four primary themes: an introduction to the academic program in which the students would be enrolled, Ohio University's town, the dormitory system, and social life at an American university.

Authentic Web Resources

Instructors created extensive link aggregates to authentic informational webpages about each topic; for example, Ohio University's dining hall services, local mobile phone service providers, and a virtual tour of the library. Quizzes and similar activities were created for each set of webpages, giving students the impetus to explore and learn, and the basic language skills they needed to access and make sense of each site. Further, Skype lessons with the instructors used the results of quizzes and activities to learn where student interests and questions lay and to target language instruction.

Instructor-Created Content

The course instructors and their colleagues in the CALL teaching and research course created some content expressly for the

course. This content was centered strongly around instructor made and produced videos about the various themes. Typical examples were video tours of Ohio University dormitory rooms and dining halls, the Ohio University campus, and the city of Athens, Ohio. These videos were created with common questions and concerns of study-abroad students in mind, for example introducing how many roommates the students might have, the sorts of food available in the dining hall, or the presence of public transportation and other services in town. The videos were hosted on YouTube, and again quizzes and other activities were created to support the students.

Instructors

The instructors for the course were nine MA candidates in Ohio University's Department of Linguistics, supported by two more MA candidates who did not interact directly with students but helped with materials design, as part of a CALL practice and research course that was part of their studies. They were overseen by their faculty advisor and by the director of the semi-intensive English program at Chubu University, who acted as a liaison between the students and instructors.

Students

Students were recruited for the orientation program during the extant study-abroad orientation presented by the university's Center for International Programs, which is required of all students studying abroad. For this pilot study, participation was purely voluntary. Seven students, out of a study abroad cohort of 72 students, elected to participate in the program. The low participation was most likely due to a combination of the voluntary nature of the program and student worries about computer literacy; this will be further discussed in the Reflections section. The participating students reflected the composition of the

study abroad cohort as a whole, with two students from the Department of English Language and Culture, three from the Department of International Relations, one from the Department of Comparative Cultures, and one from the Department of Applied Chemistry. In accordance with Chubu University's study abroad program, all were 1st-year students at the time and were to go to Ohio University at the beginning of their 2nd year.

Implementation

At the beginning of the program, the participating students met together for a Skype session with the Chubu University liaison and all the participating Ohio University instructors. At this stage, students and instructors introduced themselves, and the general outline for the course was laid out. The Chubu University liaison walked the students through registration and basic use of the course website, and students set up appointments to meet with the Ohio University instructors individually over Skype, using the Moodle website's discussion forum tool.

In the following stages, the students did the activities on the website and scheduled and took part in Skype sessions with their instructors in the United States on their own. They met with their instructors individually and in pairs about once a week via Skype, for an average of about four times total, to discuss the assigned material and have a general language lesson to support their study.

Outcomes and Issues

Recruitment

Only a very small number of the students in the study abroad cohort chose to take part in the program. As this was a pilot program, low student interest and participation was not necessarily a pure negative—in fact, low student numbers made it some-

what easier to identify and deal with technological issues in the early stages of the program—but moving forward, the program will need to reach as many students as possible. Considering the size of the MA-candidate cohort of instructors at Ohio University and the time they have available for teaching, it seems likely that as many as 20 Chubu University students could reasonably be serviced, more if they meet their instructors in pairs or in groups of three.

Instructor Responses

Instructor feedback was collected via written reports and a Skype discussion session with the Chubu University liaison. Much of the instructor feedback about the course centered on the language level of the students and the difficulty they had doing the activities and speaking with native speakers using Skype. Many instructors noted that students had a strong preference for text chat over voice chat, with lessons often proceeding much more effectively when supplemented by, if not conducted entirely by, text chat. Most of the instructors additionally had little or no practical experience teaching EFL students and found that they had to spend some time getting used to and learning how to accommodate the students' English abilities. Most instructors agreed that more extensive scaffolding activities would make both the authentic language materials and the video chat sessions much more productive.

Instructor feedback about the course content fell into two main categories. First, some instructors noted that the Moodle site presented a massive amount of information, which could be bewildering to students, especially lower level students who might lack the confidence to explore authentic materials with only post hoc support. Second, the instructors themselves sometimes found that, as graduate students, they simply were not equipped to deal with student questions about dormitory life, the undergraduate curriculum at the university, and similar concerns.

Student Responses

Student feedback was collected via one-on-one interviews. Student feedback about the course tended to echo the issues noted by instructors. Some students felt that the Moodle site presented too much information, and one student found that the lack of guidance in its use led her to nearly avoid using it altogether. On the other hand, some students accessed nearly everything the Moodle site had to offer. Students agreed with instructor assessments that video chat was intimidating and difficult, and noted that they were generally much more comfortable with text chat, especially for language questions.

Participation

Student participation, both in terms of taking part in video chat sessions and usage of the Moodle site, tended to fall off as the program progressed. After the initial group Skype meetings, the students were left on their own to schedule appointments with their instructors, to do the material on the website, and to actually meet the appointments they made. Most of the students had no problems doing so, but one student only met with her instructor once and two more failed to complete the course.

Declining participation was, like the low initial enrollment in the course, likely due to a number of factors. Most important was the voluntary and ungraded nature of the course, which meant that students could stop participating with no repercussions. As the course took place in the very busy month preceding the students' departure for the study abroad program, it is not surprising that some chose to prioritize other preparations over course participation. This was probably made easier by the lack of direct supervision of the students by Chubu University faculty; students had essentially no accountability and no requirements to check in and follow up on or verify participation in the program once it began.

Moving Forward: Reflections

As a pilot program, this first implementation of the online orientation course was far from perfect, but most of the issues faced by the administrators, instructors, and students are solvable. In the remainder of this paper I will outline changes that will be implemented in the next version of the course.

Recruitment

Clearly, the number of instructors available is more than capable of supporting a much larger cohort of students in a program such as this one. For a number of reasons, mostly administrative, student recruitment began only a few weeks before the course began, and there was very little coordination between the Chubu University liaison and either the study abroad program at Chubu University or the departments sending large numbers of students to study abroad. As the course moves forward, this communication must be increased, not only to increase student awareness of the course, but also to target students who are likely to be interested or who are likely to get the most out of a course such as this.

Course Design

The materials created for the course were generally effective, according to both instructors and students, but their implementation and the design of the Moodle site need improvement. As noted previously, some students found the Moodle site's layout overwhelming and confusing, and attention must be paid to streamlining the student interface and making it more user friendly to low-level students and those who are less computer literate.

As for content, the only major addition that both students and instructors agreed would be useful is access to undergraduate

students at Ohio University to discuss campus life and similar issues. One option is to find students in Ohio University's Japanese program who might be interested in a cultural exchange. Possibilities are currently being investigated and discussed with the instructor supervisor at Ohio University.

Instructor Training and Oversight

Many of the difficulties the instructors reported with the program centered around the students' language abilities: difficulties with not only instruction but with basic communication while using video chat, student difficulties with quizzes and activities on the Moodle site, and so on. It is the view of the instructors' supervisor and the Chubu University liaison that most of these issues are not really problems as such, but rather basic realities of teaching Japanese students with limited English proficiency. As the instructors are MA candidates, many of whom have no classroom teaching experience, difficulties in these areas are to be expected.

However, it is clear that the instructors would benefit from some degree of training to prepare them for the realities of teaching in this situation. A short precourse training session for instructors will be implemented to ensure that they understand the levels of the incoming students and teaching issues that may arise with them. An instructor with experience teaching in Japan and with using video chat and similar technologies will be involved.

In addition to the precourse training session, meetings will be held between the instructors, their supervisor, and the Chubu University liaison as the course progresses. In these meetings, issues—both with teaching and technology—that may arise will be dealt with in a timely fashion.

Student Training and Oversight

It is possible that at least some of the student difficulty with the video chat sessions came from lack of familiarity with Skype—student comments in at least one instance bear this out. In addition, some students expressed trepidation about the use of the Moodle site and lack of understanding about what exactly they were to do on the site and how. In future implementations of the course, the Chubu University liaison will meet with students for a simple training session in the use of Skype, and a detailed overview of the contents and use of the Moodle site.

In addition, just as with the instructors, the Chubu University liaison will meet face-to-face with the students as the course progresses, to identify issues in a timely fashion and pass them along to the instructors for discussion of possible solutions. Although the course will remain voluntary for the time being, more stringent accountability measures will be put into place to help ensure that students continue with the course, including weekly email check-ins with the Chubu University supervisor and biweekly group meetings to assess technology and teaching issues.

Summary

Most of the lessons learned during the 1st year of the program center around administrative and planning issues—designing and coordinating a course such as this, with active support and participation in two universities literally halfway around the world from each other, has proven to be every bit as much of a challenge as one might expect. We have learned a great deal about what works and—more importantly perhaps—what does not, and we hope that our plans for the next implementation of the course will take these lessons into account to produce an experience which is much more useful for both the Japanese students and the MA candidates at Ohio University.

Future implementations of the online program, with closer oversight of course design and implementation, along with larger bodies of students participating, will hopefully be able to focus more closely on the measurement of outcomes for the students. With a larger student body and (hopefully) a more robust program, we will be able to collect meaningful data about student satisfaction with the course. We also hope to investigate how much easier students' integration into life at Ohio University becomes, and the degree to which participation in the course eases student anxiety about the study abroad experience.

Bio Data

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