Video Conferencing for Intercultural Education

Eleanor Kane
University of Shimane

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The merits of an outreach project conducted through video conferencing between Japanese 6th graders, supported by local Japanese university students, and overseas university students in the United States will be explained in this paper. The project was part of the local university curriculum. Information in the paper includes how the video conference was implemented, the objectives and outcomes of the project, the children's feedback on video conferencing, and practical decisions relating to the setting up of similar projects, with useful advice for teachers. It was found that Japanese school children feel positive about communicating with overseas students and most want to try video conferencing again despite concerns about their lack of English ability and confidence.

本稿は、地域の日本人大学生が援助して行う「日本の小学六年生とアメリカの大学生のビデオ・リンクによる出前授業」のプロジェクトのメリットについて述べる。最初に、本取り組みの大学カリキュラムにおける役割、続いてこのプロジェクトの目的とメリットを説明し、ビデオ会議に対する小学生の感想、同様のプロジェクトを行う際の基本的な事項や留意点などについて述べる。この研究で、小学生らが自身の外国語能力に対する不安にもかかわらず、外国の学生とのコミュニケーションに対して積極的な態度をもっていることが明らかになった。

IN THIS paper I describe an outreach project conducted through video conferencing between Japanese sixth graders, supported by local Japanese university students, and overseas university students in the United States. The project came out of a larger cross-cultural programme, the Global Academic Initiative, based at East Carolina University, which links universities around the world for discussion and collaboration. These video links, through which students from different countries connect with each other in real time using webcams, began in the Anthropology department with the purpose of exploring different cultures. Such general video links have led to more specialized collaboration similar to the one described in this paper. Other specialized links have included sharing best practice in a link between student midwives in Scotland and Japan and performances by Theater Studies majors in the United States and *kagura* dancers in Japan.

The University of Shimane presently offers 2nd-year, 3rd-year, and 4th-year students a course in Cross-Cultural Understanding. We link with China, Mexico, Peru, Russia, and the US, using a joint syllabus with our partners. However, using our own local contacts, we have also been linking with Australia, Canada, Korea, Taiwan, and the UK either for one-off, single links or a limited number of links. One-off video links have also been arranged on an ad hoc basis as part of other communication courses, but these links are not included in the syllabus.

Project Rationale

For this video link project, Japanese university students went to a local elementary school and helped the sixth graders communicate with American university students. Before participating in the project, the children had taken one year of Foreign Language Activity classes, mainly with their homeroom teacher. The children met with an Assistant Language Teacher, a native speaker of English, only twice a month. Living in rural Japan, these children have few chances to meet overseas visitors and residents. In fact in 2013, Shimane prefecture had only 5,530 overseas residents, the ninth lowest figure in Japan. Of the 42 children who participated in this project, only five had been overseas.

The Japanese university students were four 2nd-year students, two 3rd-year students, and four 4th-year students. None of them had studied overseas. The 2nd-year and 3rd-year students were members of an English seminar group that involved studying for 3 years with an expatriate professor and writing their graduation theses in English. Again, the students were based at a rural university with few foreign faculty members so their opportunities to interact in English were limited. Video conferencing is one way to overcome this issue.

The American students were members of the School of Theater and Dance in the University of East Carolina. None of them spoke Japanese. However, they all had considerable experience working with children through the arts. Several of these students aimed to become drama teachers in the US and needed to practise performing for children. These students also performed via video link for very rural schools in North Carolina and for children's hospitals. Thus, this project was thought to have benefits for all three groups of students, especially the elementary school children in Japan.

Implementation of Video Link

Step 1: Initial Planning

In order to facilitate the link, I approached the sixth-grade homeroom teachers by phone to set up an initial meeting to discuss video conferencing. They agreed to meet and to allow the university IT staff to check the school's equipment. Face-to-face, I explained how previous links had been conducted, using video footage to show those links. We agreed on some possible times, which then had to be agreed to by our IT support staff and the collaborating university in the US.

Step 2: Preparing the Students

Three classes were used to prepare the Japanese university students before the video link. In the first class, students practiced brief self-introductions in English to use at the beginning of the video link. They were asked to use simple English that the elementary students would understand. Then they chose Japanese stories that they would present to the American students. They wanted to use traditional tales that the American students could adapt into short plays for children. The students discussed which stories would best represent Japanese culture. After they had chosen two tales, they each took responsibility for a section of the story and began editing a storybook version into simple English. In the second class, the students practiced their section of the story as a group. This time they used *kamishibai* (large picture cards used in traditional Japanese storytelling) as they retold the story. Students also translated parts of the *kamishibai* version of the tale so that their retelling would better match the pictures. In the third class, the students were encouraged to tell the story smoothly without reading. They also practiced adding a short Japanese explanation to each picture to help the elementary school children understand.

Step 3: Test Link

Once the equipment had been organised, I arranged a test link. This was essential because no one wanted the link to fail when there were students waiting in both countries. We conducted a test link one week in advance: on the same day of the week and at the same time as the actual link.

Step 4: Link Day

I arrived with the IT staff 1 hour before the arranged link time to set up the equipment. We established the link about 30 minutes before class, checked the sound and picture with our overseas' partners, and then muted both classrooms until the appointed time. We also set up Skype as backup in case the link failed during the class.

Objectives of the Project

Fostering a Positive Attitude to Communication

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) overall objective for foreign language activities in the elementary classroom is

> to form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (MEXT, 2009)

Video conferencing allows students to communicate more intimately and to share more than just the written or spoken word and is ideal for younger learners. Our American partners shared songs, Japanese folktales, and Native American tales that they had dramatized. They used gestures and sound effects to make the stories easier to understand, and the children also had to join in with gestures at various parts of the performance. This led to the children being fully engaged in the video link, even when they could not understand perfectly.

In this outreach link, the Japanese university students facilitated communication between the children and the American students by acting as interpreters. This gave the Japanese university students a feeling of satisfaction and boosted their motivation. Some of the university students had felt dissatisfied with their fluency after 7 or 8 years of studying English, but when they interpreted for the children they realized just how much they have achieved. The Japanese university students had to concentrate fully on their American partners' language in order to facilitate communication between the children and the American students.

Raising Intercultural Competence

Discussing one's culture through video conferencing may lead to heightened intercultural competence. According to Byram (2000),

> [a person] with some degree of intercultural competence is someone who is able to see relationships between different cultures—both internal and external to a society—and is able to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of the other, either for themselves or for other people. It is also someone who has a critical or analytical understanding of (parts of) their own and other cultures - someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural. (Intercultural communication section, para. 3).

When students prepare in class before video links, it leads to a better understanding of the diversity of their own culture. In preparation for previous links with our American partners, the Japanese

university students chose both traditional and modern children's stories that they felt would represent their culture. They discussed the message of the stories. In traditional tales, they found examples of the values which Japanese parents wanted to instil in their children: bravery in *Momotaro* and *Kintaro*; loyalty to family and obedience to parents in *Kaguyahime*; generosity to the less fortunate in *Kasa Jizo*; and care for the environment in the one modern story they chose, *Mottainai Baasan*. Students looked at how the values that older generations wished to pass on to their children have changed as society changes. For example, it is no longer necessary for boys to defend the village or for girls to stay at home, but we must all care more for the environment by reusing, recycling, and reducing waste as *Mottainai Baasan* teaches us.

Rather than teaching culture in a traditional way in which differences are compared superficially, exemplified by Kramsch (1991) as "foods, fairs, folklore, and statistical facts" (p. 218), these video links encourage students to explore both their own culture and that of the linking institution. Through class discussion to prepare for the video links, students soon realize that their experience of Japanese culture differs from their classmates. As the Japanese students prepared to explain their local myths to American students, they found they lacked knowledge about local traditions, and that the Japanese customs they had grown up with differed from family to family, with some students celebrating festivals in different ways or not celebrating them at all. They began to see that Japanese culture is not a monolithic entity with one definitive version. Discussion with the linking partners also teaches Japanese students that there is no one definitive culture in any country. Therefore, as Dervin and Liddicoat (2013) stated,

> Language educators need to move away from an educational approach which consists of building up facts about a 'target culture', comparing 'cultures' and analysing cultural routines and meanings of a particular group of people to one in which the language learners as a language user and intercultural mediator are foregrounded. (p. 4)

This project encouraged students to think about their own culture and select how and what to share with the overseas students. They joked about their more gruesome fairy tales, such as *The Tongue-Cut Sparrow,* rejecting them as potentially projecting a negative image of Japan. However, during another video link, they admitted this to their American partners, who responded with laughter and the admission that lots of American traditional stories have a darker side too.

Near Peer Modelling

The elementary school children met university students from the United States via video link, plus students from the local university face-to-face, and observed how the Japanese university students could communicate with the American students in English. It is to be hoped that seeing their near peers speak English fluently will encourage these students to study foreign languages in the future. As Murphey (1998) explained,

> Near peer models are perhaps more psychologically attractive to us in that their excellence seems more possible and easy to see and replicate because they are in some ways already very similar to us, or within our zone of proximal development. (pp. 201-202)

Merits of this Project

From an EFL teacher's perspective, there are many merits in using video conferencing. There are meaningful information gaps, opportunities to use prepared speech, many chances for the students to negotiate meaning, time for the students to communicate one-to-one with someone from a different culture, and the chance to think

about both their own and the other culture. It also gives students who are unable to travel or study overseas opportunities to speak English. Additionally, video conferencing provides scope for EFL teachers to bring more content teaching into their classes.

Elementary School Children's Feedback

After the link, the 42 elementary school children were surveyed in Japanese to explore their reactions to video conferencing and willingness to communicate in English. Nearly half of the children said they were interested in studying overseas in the future. This is very similar to the figure of 42.2% of sixth graders nationally who expressed interest in a survey of 206 children (Gakken, 2013). Just under a quarter of the students said that they felt confident speaking to people from other countries, while three quarters enjoyed the experience, and the majority wanted to try video conferencing again.

The children who did not want to study abroad said the language barrier was the main reason, and about one third said they could not speak English. A smaller number wanted to study only in Japan, while other children worried about safety overseas, loneliness, and their lack of confidence. Many children wrote that they were scared of making mistakes, or had no confidence, or were worried about meeting dangerous people. Only three children wrote that they would not like to try a similar video link again. One of these three wrote that the reason was embarrassment during the link but more positively, the second child wanted to chat more freely, and the third would rather talk face-to-face with the American students.

Managing the Video Links: Some Practical Recommendations for Teachers

Initial Planning

Setting a date for the video link with your partner institution can take a long time. The further in advance you can plan, the more likely you are to find a suitable date. If negotiations are taking place in two languages, several emails and phone calls will be necessary to convey the same information to all parties. Time zones further complicate the process. Flexibility is key. At the university level, we have some leeway to request that students come in early or stay late, but with school children we are generally restricted to normal school hours Monday to Friday.

Technology

During the first meeting with the elementary school teachers, IT staff also attended and discussed the technical hurdles. This was essential because many schools do not allow outside Internet-enabled devices to use their network. We used a router to get around this and checked that the signal was strong enough. If you do outreach work at a school that is not covered by your router, you may have to get permission far in advance to use the school's network. You should check Internet connectivity, the computer you will use for Skype or FaceTime, cables, projector, screen, speakers, and webcam.

For this project we used specialized video conferencing equipment (Polycom) with a laptop using Skype as a backup. Video conferencing equipment is often very expensive, ranging from 400,000 yen for cheaper models to several million yen. However, you can use Skype or FaceTime. A wide-angle webcam will capture the whole classroom and this too can be purchased cheaply. We used a large screen to project the images for the class to see.

Even when you have conducted a test link, the devices can sometimes fail. (We had lightning strike one morning before a link and had no Internet access on campus for several hours.) The partner institution could have a similar problem or suddenly become unavailable. Especially when doing outreach work, an alternate plan, which does not require technology, is crucial. For this project, I prepared posters to explain how to start a conversation naturally in English using phrases found in the textbook *Hi, Friends*. The Japanese

university students also knew the alternate plan and their roles if we were unable to establish the link.

Consideration of Language Proficiency

Students' language proficiency is a significant issue when linking in a foreign language. When linking with native speakers or students whose English ability far exceeds my students' abilities, I try to build a lot of prepared speech into the link. During this link with the elementary school students, the Japanese university students shared traditional fairy tales, *The Badger and the Magic Fan* and *The Old Man who Made Trees Blossom*. Prior to the link, we anticipated the questions that our American partners might ask and prepared possible answers. Extensive use of prepared speech makes video conferencing possible for less proficient students, but a teacher who can interpret if necessary is also very helpful.

Linking Day

On link day for an outreach project, you should aim to be in the classroom about 1 hour in advance to set up the equipment and establish the link. We usually do this about 30 minutes before class time, checking the sound and picture with our overseas partners, and then muting both classrooms until the appointed time.

Conclusion

Video conferencing requires a great deal of preparation, but almost all the students involved in this project expressed a desire to try it again. It is a challenging project for less proficient speakers; however, by using prepared speech and activities like those outlined above (retelling stories, exchanging questions in advance, drama with gestures), teachers can help students participate. While there may be technical hurdles, planning well in advance with the help of IT staff should allow you to overcome them. Even when the activity is well planned, teachers should still have a backup activity that does not require any technology.

When Japanese learners link with native English speakers, we should offer the native speakers some reason to participate in the link and this can be achieved by focusing on content rather than general conversation. In this project, the Japanese students retold traditional folktales for American Theatre and Dance majors, who then dramatized these stories to use in American classrooms. The American students also had the opportunity to work with children whose first language was not English and so they presented plays with sound effects and physical actions to help the children understand.

The majority of the elementary school children in this project were positive about video conferencing. Most would like to try it again. Similarly, the Japanese university students have been very positive about the video conferencing, with some maintaining contact with their overseas counterparts through Facebook and email and even visits. Despite the challenges, video conferencing affords opportunities for language learners in rural areas to connect with speakers of the language that they are studying. In the future, I hope to implement more content-based video conferencing in Content and Language Integrated Learning courses, and to increase outreach work so more children in rural Shimane can video conference with overseas schools.

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Bio Data

Eleanor Kane holds an MA Hons. in English Language and Literature from the University of Glasgow, an MPhil in Publishing Studies from the University of Stirling, and an MSc in TESOL from Aston University. She has taught EFL in the UK and Japan for over 20 years and has been based at the University of Shimane since 2006. Her research interests include CLIL, ER, and intercultural education.

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