

The application of Facebook in communication practices: An evaluation report for Japanese.

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Introduction

The symposium “E-learning in Japanese Language Education” took place in Barcelona in June 2012, organized by the “Association of Japanese language teachers in Spain” in cooperation with the “Japan Foundation”. At the symposium, a number of lecturers specialising in Japanese language education and researchers active in several different countries met and discussed relevant issues in the field. One of the presentations given at the symposium introduced the application of digital communication media; *Facebook*, *Skype*, and *Google Hangout*, amongst others. The usage of *Skype* and *Facebook* in informal communication among language learners was particularly inspiring.

As a lecturer, I try to have a Japanese guest in my class several times a year, so that the students can practice their communication skills “live” with a Japanese person as a speaking partner. It is, however, not always very easy to find a guest able to visit the class. I realized after this symposium that one can more easily reach people in any part of the world if you use a digital communication medium. I got the idea to organize a group on *Skype* or *Facebook* of our students who want to practice Japanese, and a number of Japanese students who want to practice English.

I came across a lecturer of Japanese at Tokyo Metropolitan University (TMU), Ms. Kaoru Fujimoto. She recruited a group of Japanese students within her university who followed a course called “Global Human Resources Training”. The students were from different faculties, but all of them had the ambition to have an international career. After a short orientation session it became clear that the Japanese students had some kind of resistance to communicating English through *Skype* in. They preferred written communication through *Facebook*, at least initially.

Ms. Fujimoto and I decided to start a project in which we created a virtual space where Dutch and Japanese students could learn Japanese and English from each other (*peer learning*). We decided to use *Facebook* as a platform, and made a *Facebook* group. The group consists of 25 Dutch students, 20 Japanese students and nine Japanese lecturers. Besides the three lecturers who are directly involved in this project, six other lecturers from seven different countries were invited to take a part in the group.

This article describes the progress of this project, the results, evaluation and the vision towards education in the near future.

Objectives of the project

We all know that students need a lot of practice to learn a language. Exercises are usually done in a context which is rooted in real situations: imitating a dialogue when buying an item in a store, writing a letter to an imaginary Japanese friend etc. The more real the context seems to be for the students, the better their involvement. For instance, when we had a Japanese exchange student as a guest in the class most students were very eager to ask questions, and to understand the answers. In such a case the students use the language not because they are supposed to, but because they want to get to know their guest. The internal need to be able to do or understand something is obviously one of the most powerful motivations for a human being to learn. Only a few students have opportunities to visit their Japanese friends in Japan during the holidays.

We expected this *Facebook* group would work as a peer learning community. The students would be more attracted by their counterparts in the same age group than by most lecturers. Their internal needs/interests to communicate with each other would therefore be stronger than when they were in class situations. They would be less hesitant to speak up, less anxious to make a mistake, as their counterparts would have as much trouble as they do with the language.

The objective of this project is to create a powerful learning environment where students practice their communication skills because of their internal needs and interests, and where they can learn from each other. We chose the next educational policy: 1. We stimulated and encouraged the students to use the language, and to have fun while doing so; and 2. Would not pay much attention to correct usage of the languages.

Activities

Self introduction

For my assignment all the Dutch students made a short introductory film in Japanese, and uploaded it. A few other Japanese students wrote their introduction on the wall. None of the Japanese students made an introductory film, even after asking them to do so on multiple occasions.

Introduction of hobbies

Six Dutch students made a film to introduce their hobbies. Two Japanese students made a film to introduce Japanese calligraphy and the tea ceremony.

Oral exam for the Dutch students

The students had to make and upload a short film, in pairs, consisting of a dialogue between a doctor and his or her patient. The Japanese students were asked to give feedback. Feedback was mainly friendly and complimented the results and had hardly any criticism, nor were there suggestions for improvement.

Communication through the video conference

We organized a “meeting” with the Japanese and Dutch students through a video conference twice, after they had made their acquaintance on *Facebook*. The Dutch students were very excited and enthusiastic to talk. The two or three present Japanese students tended to be more quiet than the Dutch students. The atmosphere was very friendly and encouraging. Communication went well and gave the Dutch students a feeling of self-confidence.

Other activities

Ms Fujimoto and the Dutch students often posted a link to (funny) news and sites about Japanese or Dutch culture: Japanese foods and the Dutch Royal family. Students often commented and sometimes discussions started. The participants in those discussions tended to be approximately ten Dutch students, although the Japanese students also occasionally provided comments.

Evaluation

In order to evaluate the project evaluation, questionnaires were distributed amongst the participating students and an evaluation talk with Ms Fujimoto took place. The results are below.

Evaluation of the Japanese students

- Only three questionnaires were filled in.
- It was clear that the Japanese students were hesitant to show their knowledge and skills in English in front of their fellow students.
- They hesitated to express their opinions or feeling (even in Japanese) in an open discussion forum like *Facebook*.
- One of them mentioned a lack of trust among the Japanese students; they did not know each other very well, which was one of the reasons why they did not comment often.
- They suggested a communication opportunity between two students as a better and easier format than one in an open discussion forum.
- They were surprised by and appreciated the fact that the Dutch students had a great interest in Japanese culture.
- They now have a larger interest in the Netherlands and its culture; something they did not have before.

Evaluation of the Dutch students

- They liked the activities and enjoyed the “live” communication with Japanese students. Especially for those who had never been in Japan it was seen as offering a glimpse of the “real Japan”.
- They appreciated the various posts and the comments they got from Japanese students.
- All the students indicated frustration or disappointment that the Japanese students participated much less than the Dutch students. They received much fewer responses or comments and saw much fewer posts from Japanese students than they had expected.

- Some of the Dutch students guessed that Japanese students were hesitant to use English in an open discussion forum and suggested to organize the activity in a different way, i.e. in the form of a dialogue between two students.

Interview with Ms Fujimoto

- The students who joined the group were interested in this activity.
- They tended not to be very active in the group.
- This activity was an added compulsory activity for the Japanese students, which made it somewhat difficult to motivate them to be more active.
- Recruitment was done in a short time, without thoroughly considered planning or clearly formulated objectives, which caused a rather more passive attitude on the part of the Japanese students. It might be necessary to formulate well considered learning objectives, working methods and so on, and to communicate these to the students beforehand.

Comprehensive evaluation

The group was quite active, at least on the Dutch side; they posted their own films, interesting links related to Japan or the Netherlands, asked opinions from the Japanese students, gave comments, discussed a variety of topics, and did all these activities in either English or Japanese. Dutch students spent more time reading, writing and speaking Japanese than tends to be usual. They were also always very quick when posting and answering. They are now much less shy when communicating in Japanese and have an easier time using the language than past students. However, not all Dutch students were equally active in the group; in fact certain students were not active at all. While some students grasped this opportunity to make friends with the Japanese students, others needed to be encouraged to make an effort through compulsory assignments.

The biggest problem was the reserved attitude of the Japanese students, which caused considerable frustration and disappointment for the Dutch students. We initially heard from Ms Fujimoto that the Japanese students would not dare to speak English through *Skype*, but preferred to write on *Facebook*, because they could then take more time to use English correctly. This explanation initially sounded strange to the Dutch students. I had to explain how being able to speak English has a certain status in Japan and that are perceived as more likely to be successful and intelligent. The Japanese are ashamed, on the other hand, if they cannot speak English very well. They are often afraid to make mistakes, and lose face. The Dutch students understood this situation; however, their wish to hear more from the Japanese students remained.

This project may actually have had some additional and unexpected implications for cross-cultural understanding. Dutch students are not afraid to make mistakes. They do not mind giving and receiving direct criticism either, unlike the Japanese students. The attitude of the Dutch students (open, quick in their response, and direct) may have scared the Japanese students. They do not want to be criticized in front of other students at all, as this would be a considered serious loss of face. Another point is that the Japanese tend to have more difficulties communicating with

strangers than the Dutch people. A Japanese person needs to have a relationship of trust with another individual before he can be more open.

The Dutch students recognised the differences in attitude. In a role play session we did after this project (a dialogue between a Japanese manager and a Dutch worker) the Dutch students remarked how difficult it was to play the role of the Japanese manager; because one cannot express one's thoughts directly. I hope the Japanese students have seen and learned that non-Japanese methods of communication differ from those employed outside of Japan.

Conclusion

Achievement of objectives

The objective was to create a learning environment where students could practice their communication skills out of their own volition and motivated through their own interests, and where they could learn from each other. We partially achieved the objective for the Dutch students. They were quite active and spent a significant amount of time on the *Facebook* group. There were also a few Dutch students who did only the things that they were obliged to do. The objective was not achieved for most of the Japanese students. I could not get sufficient information on what obstacles were present and why. My assumptions were that the Japanese students did not adequately know what was expected of them.

How to continue?

I was already asked by a few first year students whether they may join the group. The activity was offered only to the second year students. The idea of making friends with Japanese students is seems to be an attractive one for Dutch students. Despite of everything that went wrong, there was a lot of added value to regular class activities due to this project. We should think of methods to avoid the problems we encountered, and of ways to improve the learning environment. Activities should also be beneficial to both sides: Japanese students as well as Dutch. I have not yet received any comments from my colleagues who have joined the group from outside of our institute.

Concrete measures we could take

- Making a well-considered business plan, in which we determine what and how to measure success.
- Recruiting those Japanese students who are motivated to join the group. We need to provide correct information; what they can expect and what is expected from them.
- We should initially allow the participants more time to get used to each other and build a relationship of trust.
- Making a number of smaller groups if requested..
- Giving a short introduction course to give some information about the differences in communication to both Japanese and Dutch students.
- More communication through video conferencing and in smaller groups.

Intercultural awareness

This kind of activity could contribute to the establishment of intercultural awareness of the students as well as of the lecturers. We could add an intercultural aspect (an assignment, for instance) to this activity to make sure that they will recognize cultural differences, explain the background of the differences and adjust their attitudes. As for this last point, building up the intercultural awareness, I would like to discuss further with my colleagues who are more active in that field.