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Culture, confidence and connections: Telecollaboration as a springboard for successful JFL learning

Bio data



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Abstract

This study employed Zoom as a telecollaborative tool to connect 53 (28 on one day and 25 the next) Thai university students learning Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) with four Japanese university students. The study was an outgrowth of a concern about Thai students' waning confidence when using Japanese, and as such, we considered the activity employed in this study as an opportunity for them to develop more self-confidence. In addition, by sharing personalized cultural values with one another, it was hoped that their cultural acuity would be sharpened and enhanced via the interaction that took place. We also wanted to assess the value of using Zoom as a platform—especially regarding Breakout Rooms—a feature which allowed us to address the imbalance in student numbers from each side. The activity was a success regarding all three aims. In a posttest questionnaire Thai students indicated a boost in their L2 confidence, while both groups of students claimed they benefited from the mutual exchange of cultural ideas. In addition, Zoom worked quite well as a tool to facilitate the interaction. This is good news for L2 teachers, especially those in foreign language settings, who can use telecollaborative activities to increase their students' motivation and cultural learning.

Conference paper

Introduction

The development of cultural competence, as it relates to language learners, has become an area of great interest among L2 scholars. One of the problems, however, is how this

concept can be defined and framed in a way that maximizes the benefits to second language (L2) learners. To be sure, there is a strong attachment to the notion that to understand a language, one must also understand the culture from whence it is derived (Deardorff, 2006). Herein, there is a tacit assumption that culture and language come packaged together and are then delivered to learners. When considering the plight of foreign language learners in particular, there are three easily recognizable problems that are ineludibly adhered to this idea: 1) How can L2 learners internalize realistic cultural norms when they are removed from the source of the culture? 2) What exactly are the cultural norms that they are supposedly in need of developing? 3) Is culture simply a one-way street, flowing only from the target culture to the learners without any consideration of L2 learners' own cultural norms and values? Lacking a solid footing in the target culture, foreign language learners may not be that comfortable discussing concepts that they have only read about in textbooks or heard about from their teachers, which could have an adverse effect on their confidence when using the L2 (see especially Freiermuth & Huang, 2021). To address the concerns raised by the aforementioned questions along with their consequences, the present study investigates the effect of using a Zoom classroom, connecting Thai university students in Thailand who were learning Japanese as a foreign language (JFL), with Japanese university students in Japan.

Cultural Competences

As alluded to previously, although deemed essential to the effective learning of a second language, cultural competence is difficult to define. This is complicated by the fact that L2 learners cannot be accurately represented as a generic group with identical cultural profiles. Learners have different language learning experiences; they find themselves in different settings; they have different capabilities, and they have different backgrounds. In other words, what are considered standard cultural norms for a particular language must be balanced with what cultural notions the learners already carry with them into the L2 classroom. Culture viewed as a pot of tea with learners as the teacups being filled is a very narrow, unidirectional prism that ignores the learners' own complexities and distorts how real communication takes place. In other words, because successful conversation is founded on interaction, ideas are naturally exchanged and consequently, culture is also exchanged in the process. It was under these assumptions that Freiermuth and Huang (2021) conducted their research on culture. In their study, which connected Taiwanese and Japanese EFL learners together in dyads, culture was viewed as being something more personal to each individual rather than something that is taken from the pages of a textbook. Questionnaires given to the students confirmed that the learners developed a deeper intercultural understanding of their counterparts' cultural norms via the exchange of personalized cultural information. Students brought their own cultural knowledge with them and shared it with their peers. Freiermuth and Huang (2021) put it this way:

Stepping outside of existing cultural assumptions so that learners can view the world from different perspectives might mean making opportunities available for students to define cultural realities from their own perspectives—inside the classroom and even outside of it. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is that while students learn and practice their L2, they are simultaneously developing meaningful and more realistic intercultural competences alongside their language learning partners, which is a win for both teachers and their students. (p. 205)

To sum up, one of the fundamental aims of the present research was to offer a platform where students could experience an intercultural exchange with their overseas peers that considered the intricacies of individualized cultural expressions.

Motivation

From a purely pragmatic stance, a second aim of this study was to provide a comfortable learning space that would encourage L2 motivation. To pinpoint the problem, the Japanese foreign language teacher in Thailand had expressed concerns about her Thai students' waning confidence when using Japanese. There is strong evidence suggesting that perceived self-efficacy and confidence affect L2 learning. For example, Mills et al. (2007) found self efficacy of regulation to be the strongest predictor of success for the 303 intermediate learners of French in their study. In addition, in Piniel and Csizér's (2013) study, the researchers found that the 236 English language learners studying in a Hungarian secondary school were motivated by perceptions of their own abilities, which in turn were enhanced by their language learning experiences. As they astutely point out here:

Enhancing the learning experience by making the learning process more relevant and enjoyable for students will increase their self-efficacy, which will impact anxiety and intended behavior. Alternatively, anxiety reducing training helps students increase the amount of energy they invest into learning and that will make the process more enjoyable and their experiences more rewarding. Learning experience then affects students' self-efficacy beliefs, which in turn has both a direct and indirect impact through debilitating and facilitating anxiety on students' motivated learning behavior. (p. 539)

In other words, there was a cyclical effect—negatively perceived opportunities increased anxiety and debilitated self-efficacy as well as motivation, while positively perceived opportunities decreased anxiety and increased self-efficacy as well as motivation (see also Gardner et al., 1997).

Self-confidence is also associated with how learners view themselves. When considering Dörnyei and Kubanyiova's (2014) possible selves model, two components that point to sustaining motivation are relevant to the state of the L2 learners in this study. The first is the notion of strengthening learners' L2 visions. If L2 learners cannot easily identify a practical manner for learning the L2 by tying it to some kind of skill-building opportunity, their vision of their ideal L2 self may fade. A second, and closely related component of relevance, is the substantiation of learners' L2 visions. Because there are various hurdles to achieving language learning goals, individual experiences while using the L2 can lead a learner to conclude, "Yes, I can do this in the L2" or "No, I cannot do this in the L2"; the former psychological state tends to increase confidence and strengthen L2 vision while the latter obviously decreases and weakens it.

To sum up briefly, motivation was considered a key element in this study. Our intention was to provide an activity whereby the Thai JFL students could achieve L2 success while shoring up their L2 confidence and strengthening their language learning vision through their use of the L2.

Zoom

Using Zoom as a telecollaborative tool proved invaluable on several fronts. As a linguistic space for L2 learning, Zoom has shown itself to be relatively easy to use, and L2 teachers can easily record the interaction of students in the Zoom Lobby or in individual Breakout Rooms (with paid subscriptions all Breakout Rooms can be recorded). It has also been used to facilitate intercultural connections between dyads of EFL learners with much success. Freiermuth and Huang (2018, 2021) had Japanese and Taiwanese EFL learners resolve tasks together using the Zoom application, both of which turned out to be highly successful intercultural affairs.

An additional advantage of using Zoom involves Breakout Rooms. One nagging trouble spot for telecollaborative research in general is that classroom sizes may be quite large and are normally unbalanced, so if the aim is to promote some sort of student autonomy

there are naturally complications (Do & Freiermuth, 2020; Freiermuth & Huang, 2021). In the present study, only four Japanese students were able to participate in the telecollaborative activity (on both days) compared to the 53 Thai students learning Japanese over two days (28 on the first day and 25 on the second day), so the Breakout Rooms were essential for group-like interaction to occur.

The rationale for using Zoom in this study then was threefold: 1) It has been a useful tool in the past for L2 language learning activities, 2) it has been successfully applied as a platform connecting different L2 learners together, and 3) it has Breakout Rooms which allow for semi-autonomous group work, which mitigates the problem of large class sizes and any imbalance in the number of participants between the collaborating parties.

Objective

The aims of this study then are as follows:

1. From participating in the L2 activity, would students gain a sense of cultural learning via the interaction with their overseas peers?
2. From participating in the L2 activity, would students become more confident and motivated to learn and use the L2?
3. From a purely technological angle, how would Zoom perform?

Methodology

Prior to the activity, both groups of students were given a questionnaire to assess their motivation level and perceptions of intercultural awareness.

The joint Zoom classes were scheduled to take place over two consecutive days at the same time each day. Of course, the time differences had to be considered and times were aligned in advance based on the Thai students' class schedules. 28 Thai second-year JFL university students took part in the study on the first day and 25 the second day. They were joined by four fourth-year Japanese university students who participated on both days. Four Zoom Breakout Rooms each housing six to seven Thai students and one Japanese student were used for the interaction phase.

Prior to the scheduled activity, all of the students (including the Japanese students) were asked to create and give a Powerpoint presentation using Japanese related to various aspects of what they considered to be culturally important to them personally. Both groups of students had practiced their presentations prior to the joint class. During the joint class, each participant gave their presentation in their assigned Breakout Room, which was immediately followed by a question and answer session. In most cases, due to time constraints, only two or three questions could be asked after each presentation. Each Japanese university student, performing the role of a 'tutor,' was asked to provide their own comments and questions during that time as a way to encourage the Thai presenter who had just finished. When all of the presenters had finished, students chatted among themselves in the Breakout Rooms in Japanese. Eventually, all of the students ended up back in the main Zoom Lobby. The whole event took place in just under two hours; however, on each day, a small group of students including the Japanese 'tutors' stayed to chat with one another in the Lobby for an extended period of time (depending on the student anywhere from about 5 to 30 minutes).

Following the activity, students were asked to complete an online posttest questionnaire (Survey Planet) on motivation and cultural awareness. The items were targeted to elicit answers aimed at addressing the aforementioned research questions using a 'before' and 'after' approach (i.e., the questions asked students to compare their perceptions prior to the activity and after it). The Results and Discussion that follow are intended to shine a light on the participants' answers.

Results and Discussion

In this short paper, we will look at the three primary elements as discussed in the literature to see if the international project had the desired effect. Hereafter, we will discuss the results obtained from the questionnaire data concerning cultural competences, motivation and innovation in the form of the Zoom application.

Cultural Exchange

Regarding cultural competences, 95.3% (41/43) of the Thai students mentioned that they enjoyed explaining Thai culture to their Japanese peers. In other words, they were very willing to explain these concepts in Japanese. Here are some of their comments:

- I think It's really great things to do that we can exchange how or what we think with other people from other country and can discuss other things too.
- ...this activity was awesome because I could talk with Japanese friends a lot. And I'm glad to teach you about Thai cultures with Japanese that was so challenged me.
- We talked about Thai culture while practicing Japanese language—listening, speaking, reading and writing. Talking with Japanese friends gave me peace of mind and more confidence in using Japanese. (translated from Thai)

As for the four Japanese students who participated, three of them said they enjoyed sharing their self-identified cultural norms with their peers. Here are the three positive comments:

- They were very interested in Japan and I was very happy. I also wanted to convey the goodness of Japan more. (translated from Japanese)
- I felt a little difference between people who were interested and people who were not, but I felt that most of the students listened intently and I was happy. (translated from Japanese)
- Because Thai students looks that they love Japanese culture. They heard my presentation earnestly.

These experiences align well with the conclusions drawn by Freiermuth and Huang (2021) who found that their Japanese and Taiwanese students enjoyed expressing personalized cultural norms with one another and were enriched by their experiences.

Motivation Levels

At the heart of this project was motivation—specifically the confidence—of the Thai students learning Japanese. The aims of this project revolved around the hope that such an activity would encourage the Thai Japanese language learners by boosting their confidence using Japanese to express something very familiar to them. The activity had the desired effect. 88.4% (38/43) of the Thai students indicated that their confidence levels were boosted while using Japanese with their Japanese peers. Only one student became slightly less confident and the remaining four indicated no confidence boost. Thai students were also asked about their Japanese confidence levels using the four macro-skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking), revealing very similar results. A related question asked the Thai students to assess their perceived anxiety levels regarding using the Japanese language in the future. 69.8% (32/43) of them predicted they would be less anxious about using Japanese during any future opportunities. Besides confidence and anxiety, we also wanted to know whether or not their overall motivation to study Japanese (39/43) was bolstered. 90.7% of students indicated that the activity had indeed increased their motivation to study Japanese. Here are some comments from students related their motivation:

- I feel that this project may make Thai students' confidence to use the Japanese language grow...(translated from Thai)
- This project is good for students. It developed many kind of our skills such as communication or critical thinking.
- This is a great project to exchange knowledge and culture, and strengthen our confidence. (translated from Thai)

Considering the Japanese students were playing the role of pseudo-advisors, they were asked about their motivation towards participating in this kind of project. All four students indicated that they were extremely motivated by the activity. Here are a couple of comments explaining their motivation boost:

- I could get much information about Thai culture. Thai students introduced many kind of cultures that I've never heard before. It's so interesting. I think Thai students too.
- I was surprised at the good skills of Thai students in Japanese, and I was told that they were enthusiastic about studying. I also wanted to improve my English. At the same time, I was motivated to learn not only English but also other languages. (translated from Japanese)
- I've exchanged contacts with some students, so I'd like to be able to communicate with my peers again sometime after the project. (translated from Japanese)

The results of this project are a testament to continuing this kind of project in the future. Many of the Thai students as well as the Japanese students mentioned their anxieties prior to the online meeting, but the interaction both within the Breakout Rooms and later in the lobby helped to vanquish their fears while simultaneously fueling their desire to improve their L2 skills. In other words, their L2 self-confidence and L2 self-esteem were both bolstered through such activities (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). As Bandura (1997) has mentioned self-efficacy can be consciously boosted through any challenging success; in our case, the success achieved during the language learning experience cleared a pathway for further successes down the road.

Using Zoom Breakout Rooms

The final angle we examined was the innovation aspect. Zoom Breakout Rooms proved to be very easy to use and as a result, any worries about technological problems soon evaporated. Nonetheless, it must be understood that all of the students were quite accustomed to using Zoom. In fact, many of the students seemed quite comfortable employing various third-party 'mood-making' applications to make the Breakout Rooms more cheerful places to interact although these were applications that the researchers knew very little about.

The positive opinions about using Zoom for this kind of project were not limited to the researchers' opinions, however. The students also realized the benefits that Zoom provided. In all, 93% (40/43) of Thai students felt that Zoom was a good application for the learning of Japanese. They gave comments such as these:

- The connection was stable not only for videos and voices, screen sharing was good.
- Even if we are in different places, we can enjoy talking to each other. (translated from Thai)
- Zoom is simple and easy to use with many functions to choose from. (translated from Thai)

Japanese students agreed with their Thai peers, summed up in this one comment:

- Because it is easy to contact people.

To sum up, Zoom functioned well. Of course, some students had internet connectivity problems, but these incidents were few and far between. Nevertheless, even as technological advances are made, problems inevitably follow along (see especially Do & Freiermuth, 2020), but in many cases proper preparation can minimize the negative effects. That was our experience in this study and so, from the viewpoint of technological agency, Zoom served the students well.

Conclusion

In this short paper, we looked at three aspects of this telecollaborative project, namely cultural competences development, motivation and innovation. The project proved successful on all three fronts. Students enjoyed exchanging personalized cultural information; they were motivated by participating in the project and most importantly, Thai students' gained confidence to use Japanese; and finally, Zoom Breakout Rooms worked very well and made it easy to group students together despite the significant imbalance concerning numbers.

Of course there are some limitations that need to be mentioned. The study consisted of one two-hour period for the Thai students, so despite the positive sentiments they expressed, it is difficult to know the durability of their improved confidence and motivation. Longer term studies are always warranted and encouraged here by us as well. Also, this was done in an Asian context. Although there are many cultural differences between Japan and Thailand, there is also a palpable sense of camaraderie between the groups. To expand upon this research, we suggest using telecollaborative tools to connect L2 learners from a wide-variety of backgrounds encompassing various language learning circumstances.

As a final note, we are quite satisfied with virtually all aspects of this project. It is safe to say that there was trepidation on everyone's part as to whether or not this project could be 'pulled-off'. We can trumpet the successes from our own viewpoint but would rather give the students the floor. When asked whether or not they would like to continue this kind of project, all 47 (43 Thai and 4 Japanese) students hoped that we would continue this kind of interactive class, which can be summed up rather nicely by these two comments—one from each side: "Talking to Japanese people is a great opportunity to practice speaking Japanese and exchanging ideas. Therefore, I would hope this project could be organized again in the future" (translated from Thai) and, "We can learn how to talk and tell for people who do not know Japanese and Japanese culture much. It's very important learning, I think."

As a final pedagogical note, we would highly recommend this kind of project. From simple observation of the Breakout Room interactions, we could see that students were truly enjoying the chance to engage one another using the L2. In the end, it was very satisfying to observe L2 students relishing the opportunities to use the L2 in ways that were important to them, and that is really what is at the heart of language learning. Our recommendation to L2 teachers then is to open up every door that might lead students in that direction and this is what Zoom provided for our collaboration.

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