Traditional Methods Trump ICT in Students' International Communication

若者の国際交流におけるコミュニケーション手段
―ICT活用と従来方法の比較―

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〈Abstract〉

It has been claimed that the usage of ICT for international communication between students living in different countries benefits both sides greatly by transcending borders (United Nations Youth, 2014). Furthermore, ICT can provide students with a "voice space" (Lynch, 2014), while simultaneously making them stakeholders in their own education (Lynch and McKeurtan, 2012), resulting in greater student satisfaction (Lynch, 2014). However, the results of this research show that students gain greater satisfaction and educational benefit through school/university and teacher-organized traditional face-to-face methods of international communication, while they contribute and gain little when using ICT. The situations of two groups of Japanese university students (11 people in total), and three groups of Irish high school students (60 people in total) are used as case studies, with both face-to-face and ICT-based communication activities investigated. Areas where teacher involvement is most beneficial and when such involvement does not seem to make a difference are identified.

〈Keywords〉

International Communication, Traditional Methods, ICT

1　Introduction

The educational system in Japan has traditionally been teacher-centred (Hirasawa, 2010) and, by and large, remains that way today despite national reforms enacted in 1999 to implement more Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Abe, 2013). Furthermore, Japan is currently the only country in the world where over 25% of the population is aged over 65 (Goto, 2014), (Kyodo, 2014), compared to a global average of 16% for developed countres (Kulik et al., 2014). These factors, combined with a relatively "well stocked" population pyramid for the 35+ age group (NIH, 2014), show that young people in Japan are disadvantaged in terms of both proportional and voice representation. This is then reflected in their lack of power, including political and consumer voice power (Takao, 2009). Therefore, it follows that Japanese youth need to be provided with tools that empower them and which amplify their voice, making their opinions heard within the education system and also in society. One such tool could be ICT as it can "offer opportunities to young people for learning and skill development" (United Nations Youth, 2014), provided that broad access is provided (Yigitcanlar and Baum, 2009). Another tool could be in the form of enabling youth practice and participation through project based learning (PBL) (Lynch, 2014), where, if properly carried out, students are given the space to become confident, adaptable, independent, self-directed and active contributors (Lynch, 2014).

The bottom line is the continued wellbeing of the Japanese nation in the face of economic and demographic headwinds. As education is essential for such wellbeing (Husbands, 2013), the topic of providing a suitable environment and opportunities for the educational development of youth should be of interest to all, regardless of age.

This paper investigates how using ICT and traditional methods compare when conducting a program that has the aim of enhancing international cultural understanding.

2　Research Situation and Apparatus

2-1 Student Participants

This research is based on providing a mix of ICT and traditional communication opportunities to students in Japan and Ireland. The students' median ages were 19 for the Japanese students, and 17 for the Irish students, with the median age of both groups being one year less that the age of majority in their respective countries, i.e., one year before the age at which "they become responsible for their educational program" (Millar, 2003). This put responsibility on the program organizers to create the educational framework to be studied. The number of participants was 11 Japanese and 60 Irish students.

2-2 Student Pairings and Conditions

Two pairings of students were made. The first pairing was between a group of seven Japanese students and 49 Irish upper-secondary school students, with the Irish students divided into three groups. The students were in contact with each other using traditional methods (explained below). This pairing occurred in March 2014, and is referred to later as "Case Study 1". The second pairing was between one group of four Japanese students and one group of 11 Irish students. The methods used for communication were traditional ways and using ICT (explained below). This pairing was carried out from July to August 2014 for the ICT portion, and in September 2014 for the traditional method portion, and is referred to later as "Case Study 2".

2-3 Materials and Resources Used

The materials and resources used for the traditional communication method were Japanese and Irish games (including indoor and outdoor), PowerPoint presentations, discussion time, question-and-answer sessions, foods local to Japan (brought to Ireland), language exchange and "show-and-tell" (students show each other objects unique to their culture and describe them). The ICT method used an online-based Social Networking Service (SNS) called Edmodo. This is similar to more popular services such as Facebook but, avoids such services' "potential problems (of safety, privacy, and professional image)" (Cain et al., 2009). Edmodo is a safer alternative as it is a school-age oriented SNS service, and gives teachers complete control "with tools that let you determine who can join groups, ensure they remain private, and monitor member activity, with safety built right in" (Edmodo, 2014). In other words, the teacher creates a communication space, has the students join, and can then monitor their activity. Furthermore, using the Edmodo system allowed the program organizers/researchers to avoid the lack of transparency and information overload realized in social and collaborative computing when using less controlled media such as Facebook (Kusk, 2013), while ensuring contextual integrity including social appropriateness and relevant information flow.

3　Case Study Contents and Findings

3-1 Case Study 1

A group of seven Japanese students signed up in October 2013 for an organised study abroad trip, to take place over four weeks in England and Ireland in February and March 2014. The students studied the English language for three weeks while in England, with the fourth week being comprised of using what they learned in Ireland (having developed language skills high enough to allow them to participate in company visits, cultural events, and student exchange meetings). In the months prior to leaving Japan, the students prepared for face-to-face meetings with students in Ireland. They prepared to explain their daily life in Japan and Japanese culture, while also preparing some questions to ask the Irish students. The teachers in charge (of each group) stayed in contact with each other via email to organize three different meetings between: A. The Japanese students and one group of 22 Irish students (for 80 minutes), B. the Japanese students and one group of 16 Irish students (for 40 minutes), and C. the Japanese students and one group of 11 Irish students (for 40 minutes). Each of the above meetings occurred on a different day, in a different school in Ireland. As the Irish students in each meeting differed, and the time allowed varied, the contents of each meeting also changed. The longer time provided for the first meeting made it possible to play an Irish sport together as well as make some presentations about Japan, while the shorter meetings consisted of conversation games (created to help the Irish students who were coming up to their state examinations in basic Japanese, including oral testing), and other contents mentioned earlier.

Feedback obtained from the Japanese and Irish students showed that, whatever the meeting content and focus, the students enjoyed the time spent together and expressed enthusiasm towards (someday) meeting again and also were interested in continuing to learn about each other's lifestyles, traditions and cultures. The teachers in charge of each class also expressed similar opinions.

3-2 Case Study 2

A group of four students signed up in May 2014 to take part in a similar study abroad trip, again to take place over four weeks in England and Ireland in August and September 2014. The purpose and content was approximately the same as for the Case Study 1 students. However, as the face-to-face meetings were such a success in Case Study 1, methods to increase the frequency and ease of student-student interaction and communication were explored. ICT was chosen as a practical method that would allow the students to easily yet successfully communicate with each other before they had their face-to-face meetings.

The teacher in charge of one group created a communication space on edmodo.com, and invited the other teacher to join it. Then, all the Japanese and Irish students were invited to use the platform to exchange messages during one month from July to August (prior to the Japanese students leaving Japan for England and Ireland).

The following communication was carried out:

1. Between teachers:

   Over 20 emails were exchanged between teachers.

2. Posted by teachers on the platform:

   a. Teacher 1: Interested in meeting some Japanese university students in early September? Check Edmodo and let me know!!

   b. Teacher 2: The latest news is that 4 students, and 2 teachers will visit. We will arrive on Saturday evening, so it might be difficult to meet on that day. We can meet on Sunday or Monday.

   c. Teacher 1: A group of students from XXX Japanese University will be visiting Cork in early September. They will be a mixed group, studying some English as part of their degree.

   I am thinking of arranging a get together on the weekend, if some of you would be interested in joining? We could even put you in touch to start getting to know each other in advance. Either way it would be very good for your Japanese in your LC year to have the real thing to practice on!!

   d. Teacher 1: Join the Kanazawa-Cork Edmodo group and get to know the students from Kanazawa before they visit in September. Use this code to join: XXX.

3. Posted by Japanese students to Irish students:

   a. Japanese student 1: My name is Asami. I'm also looking forward to meeting you in September.

4. Posted by Irish students to Japanese students:

<none>

It could be seen from the SNS messages alone that the students, for some reason, rarely or never posted on the SNS website. On the other hand, the above messages written by the teachers are only a part of the total volume of messages written, as they also wrote many email messages to plan the face-to-face meeting event. The students were not given each other's email addresses, so this method of communication was not an option for them.

Finally, the Case Study 2 students met face-to-face in September 2014, and they all reported similar things to the Case Study 1 students, i.e., that they would like to continue communicating with one another and that the experience of meeting each other was a beneficial one.

4 Results

The students were very enthusiastic when it came to face-to-face meetings, and put a lot of effort into keeping communication going when they were in the same room as each other. They also worked hard in preparing for the events, doing such work as making PowerPoint presentations, bringing Japanese/Irish objects to talk about, organizing sporting events, preparing discussion topics, etc. However, when it came to using ICT, students did not work hard to ensure that communication took place. The lack of effort put in when the ICT platform was provided to students was in contrast to the enthusiasm students showed when preparing for the face-to-face meetings, or during those meetings themselves.

In short, it was seen that the use of traditional, face-to-face methods to provide a space for young people to communicate and to express their opinions was very successful. On the other hand, the ICT-based space did not show good results as students did not use it.

5 Conclusion and Further Research

While ICT has been touted as being something that can increase access to development opportunities (Robinson, 2008), simply having increased access does not mean that students avail themselves of the opportunities provided. This research showed that students, when using ICT to enable international and cross-cultural communication, did not succeed in such communication, while they were successful with traditional methods. This shows that simply providing ICT and telling students to use it is not an effective strategy, even when the ICT environment is easy

to use and safe. Overall, in these test cases, the use of traditional methods trumped the use of ICT in international communication.

This study brought up the following questions and further research paths:

1. If the ICT system were one chosen by students, would they be more willing/prone to use it? The Edmodo system is not a brand that students were familiar with. Maybe allowing the students to use a system that has a higher brand value to them could increase their usage of ICT? It should be kept in mind, however, that allowing this could lead to security problems that would require mitigation strategies.

2. The students in Case Study 1 were not the same people as used in Case Study 2. Would having students meet each other (face-to-face) once and then have them use ICT in advance of a second meeting (say, 6 months later) result in more enthusiasm towards ICT, thus creating a situation where students would begin to benefit from the use of ICT in international communication? The issue with this is that most students do not have the personal finances to be able to fund two foreign trips in such a short time. For many students, going on one foreign language and culture trip abroad is a one-off luxury.

3. Would it be beneficial for the teachers/researchers to make it a requirement for students to post messages using the prescribed ICT system? Then, once students had gotten used to the system, teachers could remove such a requirement, with the expectation that ICT usage would be self-perpetuating. This would need to be balanced against giving students freedom to express their ideas freely through student-centered activities (Lynch, 2014).

4. Schools and universities (including research programs) make huge investments in ICT. It has been shown that, in Japan, investment in computerized information (e.g., software and databases) exceeds that of other OECD countries including the US, yet does not result in comparable productivity growth (Fukao et al., 2009). Would it benefit students more if some of this money were diverted from ICT investment and put towards funds that help students travel to interact with their peers abroad?

Further study needs to be done on this subject to understand how to provide an environment best suited to the learning needs and methods used by students when pursuing effective international communication.

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