Abstract

Multimodal approaches to language learning and teaching has been evolving along with developments in technology. Telecommunication is one of the multimodal strategies that is becoming more prevalent in the field of English as a Second Language, or ESL. The purpose of this article is to provide a literature review of recent developments in telecollaboration between Japan and the United States, specifically focusing on how it promotes intercultural competence, civic competence, and language development among educators and students. It will also address the limitations and potential directions for telecollaboration in education.
Telecommunication, Intercultural Competence, and Language Development: A Review of Educational Telecollaboration Between the U.S. and Japan

Introduction

Telecommunication—defined as the means of electronic communication across distances—has become one of the main tools used in educational contexts. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the urgency of telecommunication has never been higher. Many students eager to participate in study abroad programs were unable to do so due to the ongoing pandemic. In addition, educators around the world have had to abruptly change their mode of instruction from in-person teaching to virtual instruction in an online environment. However, telecommunication can still foster intercultural competence and language development among both students and educators, promoting “internationalization” domestically. Philip G. Altbach defines internationalization as “…specific policies and programmes undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments or institutions to cope with or exploit globalization.”¹ This paper will review some recent research on the interconnection between telecommunication, cross-cultural competence, and language skills, focusing on how telecollaboration strengthens the relationship between U.S. and Japanese students and educators by increasing civic competence, communication skills, and intercultural understanding.

Telecollaboration and the Development of Intercultural Competence Among Students

One of the essential goals for telecommunication, or any form of intercultural communication, is to increase cross-cultural understanding. A few recent studies of telecommunication between American and Japanese students have demonstrated how telecommunication effectively develops intercultural competence, defined by Richard L. Wiseman as “the knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures.”² In Custer and Tuominen’s study, an American sociology professor at a community college and a Japanese sociology instructor designed a virtual exchange activity through a learning management system. In this activity, fifty American college students and forty-six Japanese students who were enrolled in sociology courses were instructed to respond to the following question in a discussion forum:

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“write a 5+ line paragraph, present an example of how your society promotes particular gender roles in family and/or work.” The results of pre- and post-surveys illustrated that more American and Japanese students viewed themselves as global participants with increased cultural knowledge who were willing to interact with people from various backgrounds after the study. These students also showed an increase in their value of learning about various cultures.

Besides formally integrating telecommunication into specific courses, new studies are demonstrating how informal usage of online social networking can similarly increase students’ intercultural competence. One of the prominent studies conducted by Ngai, Yoshimura, and Doi examined how using Facebook increased the intercultural competence of Japanese study abroad university students and American university students. Through a mixed-methods approach, the researchers collected data using interviews and a Likert scale measurement designed to assess the development of the five dimensions of transnational competence through the usage of Facebook. Results stipulated that students scored the highest on the analytic competence and functional competence dimensions under transnational competence. Statements to measure analytic competence included “Your intercultural interactions in SNS [Social Networking Services] have allowed you to gain knowledge about local people’s [e.g., American or Japanese] values, beliefs, and practices.” Queries for functional competence included statements such as “Your intercultural interactions in SNSs have helped you develop the skills for building positive relationships with people of different backgrounds.” This result lead to the conclusion that students gained intercultural competence by furthering their understandings of different people’s values and strengthening relationships through the informal use of SNS.

**Telecommunication, Civic Competence, and Intercultural Competence Among Educators**

Along with increasing intercultural competence among students, recent studies have also highlighted the efficacious effects of telecommunication on educators. A study by Tsuda et al. used a narrative research design through semi-structured interviews to examine how pre-service and in-service physical education teachers in America and Japan developed their intercultural competence through telecollaboration. The participants in this study were six elementary school physical

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education teachers from a school in the United States and four elementary school physical education teachers from two different schools in Japan. The teachers implemented a cross-cultural unit called CULTURE, which was developed by a university faculty member who was also an elementary school (ES) physical education teacher. In the unit, ES students were told to choose certain games and activities that they would like to introduce to their collaborating schools in a way that overcame the language barrier. Then, they recorded their activities on video and shared them through Google Drive. Tsuda et al. explained, “ES chose American ‘backyard games,’ such as KAN JAM, bocce ball, and hopscotch. The children in Tomo-oka and Sakura-kaze ESs decided to share Japanese cultural pastimes, such as keidoro (i.e. the cops and robbers), jankenpa (i.e. hopscotch-like game), and nawatobi (i.e. jump-rope).” Afterwards, the students watched the videos from the other schools and played the activities themselves.

The study results showed that both students and educators increased their intercultural competence, with several themes emerging from the results. The educators noticed that the students had a higher sense of appreciation not only for other cultures, but also for their own. In addition, they increased their communication skills by collaborating with their own classmates to develop the video and talking to their assistant language teacher (ALT) more frequently. The educators also commented on the benefits of using technology such as Google Drive since participants can easily find all the videos in one place. Ultimately, the educators showed an increased motivation to incorporate more cross-cultural elements in their future teaching.

Another study delved into how telecommunication increases civic competence in regards to global education for pre-service social science teachers in Japan and America. This study was conducted by Callahan, Umeda, and Matsubara. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach to measure whether telecollaboration between the teachers affected their prioritization of instructional practices that focused on principles of civic competence, communication, and global citizenship. Civic competence is defined by Callahan as the ability to “…interpret information, weigh contrastive evidence, make and support arguments about solutions to public issues, and take action according to their well-informed conscience.” Through groups of mixed American and Japanese teachers, teachers

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introduced their group members’ cultures in short videos, read articles about different approaches to social science education in their group members’ countries, and collaborated on a final project “to develop a brief activity—between 10 and 20 minutes—to help secondary social studies students in both nations demonstrate civic competence for international and global education.” The results showed that teachers were able to make references to one or more components of civic competence as it relates to international and global education throughout their projects.

**Relationship Between Telecollaboration and Language Development**

In addition to increasing intercultural competence, telecommunication has also been shown to increase language skills. Hirotani and Fuji’s study examined how telecommunication can increase Japanese language learners’ (or Japanese L2 learners) ability to comprehend and use Japanese proverbs. Twenty-three native Japanese speaking university students and nineteen L2 university learners of Japanese in America asynchronously telecollaborated using Facebook to teach and learn Japanese proverbs. The Japanese students chose proverbs that they thought would interest American students and created videos with explanations and short skits to teach them. After the American L2 learners of Japanese watched these videos, they wrote reflections about what they learned and created their own skits in Japanese using the new proverbs. The results indicated that both the L2 learners of Japanese and native Japanese speakers felt a sense of accomplishment and increased their intercultural understanding.

Specifically, the L2 learners of Japanese felt that their verbal communication skills increased, and the instructors assessed that they had a high degree of accuracy using the proverbs. Similarly, Saito and Akiyama’s research adds evidence to telecommunication’s positive effects on language learning for Japanese learners of English as a foreign language. In their study, thirty Japanese university students taking English as a foreign language courses and fifteen American university students participated in weekly theme-based conversation activities using the virtual conferencing tool Google Hangouts. The American university students were trained to provide recasts as a form of corrective feedback during the conversation, but their main focus was to maintain fluency and the flow of the conversation. Recasts have been defined by second language acquisition researchers as “utterances that repeat a learner’s incorrect utterance, making only the
changes necessary to produce a correct utterance, without changing the meaning.”¹⁰ The Japanese students were divided into two groups: a control group that participated in weekly grammar and vocabulary activities, and an experimental group that participated in dyadic conversations with the American students.

From the results of a pre-test and post-test focusing on oral skills given to both groups, Saito and Akiyama concluded that the experimental group displayed significant improvement in their correct usage of grammar, lexical variation, and perceived fluency even though there were no significant differences in their pronunciation and accentedness. In contrast, the control group did not show significant gains in any category.¹¹ Ultimately, these studies show the promise of cross-cultural telecommunication and exchange on language development.

**Limitations of Telecommunication**

Even though the studies above depicted the strengths of telecommunication, using telecommunication for education and cross-cultural understanding does have some limitations. First of all, most of the studies had a small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the results to learners of various proficiency levels. In addition, even though the utilization of SNS and social media promoted students’ intercultural competence, the passive use of SNS is still inadequate. Students need to be guided to actively use social media in regular classroom assignments to become independent and culturally competent learners.¹² Students should also have a similar level of disciplinary knowledge to fully reap the advantages of the exchanges.¹³

**Future Directions of Telecommunication in Education**

The studies above illuminate the potential benefits of telecommunication in global educational contexts. Through telecollaboration, U.S. and Japanese students and educators have shown substantial growth in intercultural understanding and language development, deepening the relationships between the two nations. Ultimately, students and educators can have the rewards of

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¹¹ Saito and Akiyama, “Video-Based Interaction.”


studying abroad at a fraction of the cost, allowing them to “internationalize” domestically; they are able to conduct cultural exchange, improve their language skills, and increase their civic competence and intercultural understanding. Future studies can focus on longitudinal studies and examine the effects of other social media platforms, such as Instagram, Line, and Twitter, on these factors. Additionally, future studies can supplement asynchronous telecommunication with more synchronous interactions. The ubiquity of new technological advancements demonstrates the limitless prospects of telecommunication in education. Essentially, telecollaboration can be an indispensable tool to promote “internationalization” domestically.
Author Biography

Tiffany Laiyin Lao has taught English as a Second Language (ESL) in community colleges and foreign language centers in California and New York. She has also taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan for four years in the JET program. Currently, Tiffany is working as an ESL instructor in Irvine Valley College, Golden West College, and San Bernardino Valley College in Southern California. Tiffany has a BA in Sociology and East Asian Studies and an MA in Applied Linguistics from Teachers College, Columbia University. Tiffany loves learning new languages and meeting new people from around the world. She is interested in students’ motivation to study English as a second language, corpus linguistics, and using innovative applications for English learning.

About the JETs on Japan Forum

The JETs on Japan Forum is a partnership between USJETAA and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) that features selected articles of JET alumni perspectives on U.S.-Japan relations. The series aims to elevate the awareness and visibility of JET alumni working across diverse sectors and provides a platform for JET alumni to contribute to deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations from their fields. The articles serve as a resource to the wider JET alumni and U.S.-Japan communities on how alumni of this exchange program are continuing to serve as informal ambassadors in U.S.-Japan relations.