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Developing Cross-Cultural Awareness in Provincial Hokkaido by Connecting Exchange Students and Kosen Japanese Students

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Abstract

Japan has been able to greatly increase the number exchange students in higher education, as a way to improve its global ranking and competitiveness on the international scene. As of May 2018, there were 298,980 international students in Japanese higher education and language institutes. Through various coordinated efforts, the government has so far been successful in reaching a steady increase of 12% each year since 2015, based on the JASSO (Japan Services Student Organization) survey.

However, not all regions or prefectures are equal in this effort. Indeed, data show a great discrepancy between urban areas, and provincial Japan, the Kanto region, and unsurprisingly the greater Tokyo metropolitan area, concentrating close to half the total population of international students.

As teachers in the Hokkaido area, that only hosts 1.7% of those students, our goal with this practical research is to provide more opportunities for local students to interact with their international counterparts. As cross-cultural understanding, and development of autonomous communication methods, English is a tool, not a finality.

The three-step approach, spread over 3 years, consists first in 2-day seminars, then written communication using Moodle chatrooms, and finally group videolink discussions with Skype or GInet.

In this presentation, we will focus on the rationale behind the project, the challenges we have encountered and how the use of technologies have provided some answers for the development of a better, and more effective framework.

The authors of this study believe it will provide valuable data and a solid framework that could be applied in other technical institutes all through Japan.

Keywords: *international exchange, intercultural communication, global studies in provincial areas, collaborative learning between Japanese and foreign students*

Introduction

Globalization of technical education and cross-cultural communication have been bustling concepts in the technical programs all over the world for the past few years. However, in order to develop such skills, and ambitions, Japanese students must first be accustomed to communicating with foreigners, to apply their classroom knowledge to practical communicative situations. This opportunity is readily available in large Japanese cities, or large universities which have a large foreign exchange student body, but what can be done for smaller cities and universities? The goals of the present educational research were to provide Japanese students with opportunities to get engaged into multicultural, multiracial, and multi-lingual environment. Furthermore, for the purpose of this study English is not considered an objective, but a tool among others to successfully achieve cross-cultural understanding. Finally, in a globalized, ultra-connected world, the constant flow of information and news makes it hard, and sometimes impossible to identify, and retain important world events, and cross-cultural affairs. This project also put the emphasis on urbanism, environmental issues, and disaster preventions in several countries.

Objectives

This research group was formed through a clear objective: analyse, encourage, and develop best practices for cross-cultural communication through a variety of methods. We based our methods and efforts on an approach that was previously conducted by Ishikawa, Matsuda, and Ono (2009) to ensure access to direct intercultural exchange for students located in regional areas.

The area we are focusing on in this research is located between the southern and central parts of Hokkaido, where are based the three higher education institutions our team members work at: NIT Hakodate College, Muroran Institute of Technology, and NIT Tomakomai College (Figure 1).

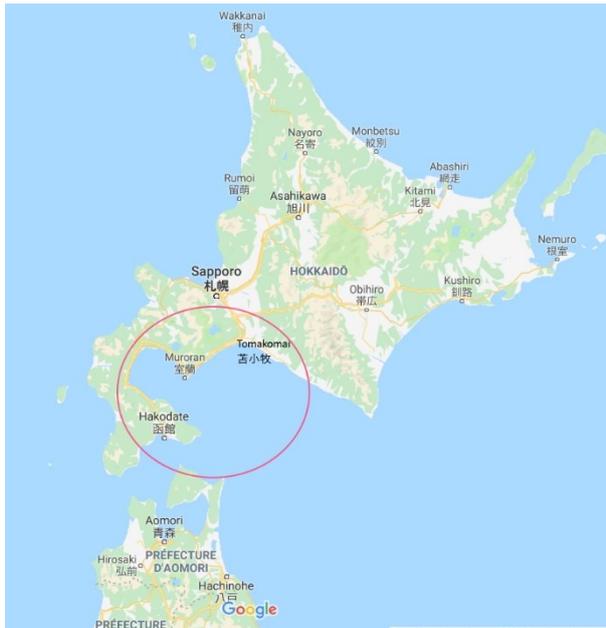


Figure 1. Location of the research team members.

Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, and by far the largest prefecture, is only home to 5.4 million people, for a density of 64.5 people per inhabitable km². As point of reference, Tokyo's density is 6168, Osaka is 4639.

With only 1.7% of Japan's total number of exchange students, and a density just 1% percent of that of Tokyo, we can understand that the chances of interactions are few and far between. Even then, most of Hokkaido exchange students are centralized at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, which gathers 2349 of the 3614 foreign students in the prefecture.

As such, we can see the importance of developing such opportunities for communication in rural areas such as ours. The timeframe of this research was divided into 3 distinct parts.

Educational Practices Step 1: On-Site Seminars

First, and what we felt what the most important, were the camp training lessons. There, Japanese students were invited along their international counterparts to two on-site educational gatherings.

The first seminar was held in the southernmost city of the group, Hakodate.

The seventeen participants, who had been recruited from each of the institutes, represented five countries: China, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, and Mongolia. The engineering field were also varied: chemistry, production systems, mechanical, civil, electrical, and information science. (Figure 2).

Held during students' free-time in early December 2017, the main theme of the seminar was the introduction to cross-cultural communication, along with with a lecture comparing urbanism and city development between the three research cities (Hakodate, Muroran, and Tomakomai). This lecture was given in Japanese by M. Kuriyama, professor of civil engineering in the

department for engineering innovation at NIT Tomakomai. The students, divided into groups, also had an opportunity to reflect upon stereotypes, and how they influence communication.



Figure 2. Students presenting some aspects of their cultural background in Hakodate.

The second on-site seminar took place during a 3-day weekend in October 2018 in Otaki seminar, Date city, west of Tomakomai. The theme of that seminar was one that echoed with all students-Japanese and foreign-Disasters; their prevention, human causes, and effect they have on city planning and environment. 19 students from the following areas were represented: India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Thailand, Vietnam, each group being led by a PhD student from that country, who were studying at MIT. Although group discussions were conducted in Japanese and English, students had to focus on creating a presentation in English. The educational practice was two-fold: visiting a location that had been hit by a disaster near Toya Lake, and for students to use their engineering skills to discuss and reflect upon disaster prevention methods in the four countries (Figure 3).



Figure 3. One of the groups brainstorming ideas for their poster session. 3 countries were represented in that group (Japan, Thailand, and Mongolia).

The discussions had all the more impact that it took place a few weeks after the large 6.6 magnitude hokkaido earthquake on September 6th 2018. Most students, both Japanese and international, were in Hokkaido during the disaster and were able to share their impressions, memories, and fears about the earthquake.

Students were also taken to lake Toya, famous for its beautiful scenery but also for bearing the marks of a recent volcanic eruption. Indeed, Mount Usu erupted in

2000 spewing burning gases and mud. It was the mud slides that had the most impact on local towns, destroying whole roads and buildings on their path (Nakano). Although no one died, the damage incurred was estimated to be 10.3 billion yen (approx, 92 million US dollars), and 4700 inhabitant of nearby municipalities had to be evacuated (Figure 4).



Figure 4. A residential building, swept by a mudslide near Toya Lake.

Students participating in the research groups were able to see first-hand the immense power and potential for destruction that such disaster could bring to nearby locations. It also motivated them to create posters describing environmental issues in the 4 countries of the PhD students, who led each group (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Group picture with students holding their posters.

Educational Practices Step 2: Moodle Communication

Once the on-site camps have been completed, our next task was to set up a moodle-like textchat system for students to participate. Indeed, creating a balance between teacher control and student autonomy, a moodle-like system will not only help them improve student's comprehensive language ability, but also their autonomy, a key-component in learners' motivation, through peer communication (Ma, 2016). Unfortunately, and quite ironically, while setting the communication modules was systematic, the authors did not anticipate that motivating the foreign students to join, and participate would be much more challenging a task. Some reasons include, but may not be limited to:

school/university calendar differences, different approach to digital literacy, lack of motivation, different culture.

Future Practices

At the time of this paper's submission, the authors are planning another on-site training that will also include digital literacy reinforcement. Indeed, a group of Italian students from a technical high-School coming to NIT Hakodate College in early September of 2019, will participate in a seminar in Otaki.

Furthermore, the final stage in our three-step objective will be to create video-links using BlueJeans or Skype, giving more autonomy to students, reinforcing their motivation, and thus creating a long-lasting communication line between the Japanese and foreign students. As Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are used and developed differently in Italy and Japan, putting these protocols in place will require precise communication, and dedication between the teachers and students of the various schools and countries.

We are hoping to gather empirical data on students' motivations through questionnaire, thus leaving the possibility for further improvement in a follow-up research.

Conclusions

The objectives of this research were quite ambitious to begin with. We wanted to offer Japanese students from provincial areas an opportunity, a gateway to cross-cultural understanding, while expanding their horizons concerning issues that future technicians and engineers will need to focus on and solve: environmental changes, and disaster preventions. The first part of the project was succesful, but a lack of coordination between group members, and difference in school calendars made participation to digital communication harder to set up and enact. Further reflection is needed to analyze, and overcome the logistical challenges.

Acknowledgements

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