

# Evaluation of a Joint Japanese-Filipino Collaborative CMC Programme

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**Abstract** This study reviews a collaborative project between an English language company based in the Philippines and a university in western Japan. Forty first-year undergraduate university students engaged in four synchronous, online, computer-mediated sessions over the course of one semester. The objectives were to reduce language anxiety, improve motivation, increase confidence in verbal skills, reduce the amount of silence in the classroom and increase the amount of time students were responsible for interaction.

**キーワード** テレコラボレーション, Skype, ルーブリック, 英語プレゼンテーション

日本とフィリピンとの CMC プログラムの評価の検討

—大学の英語授業での実践を対象として—

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あらまし 本研究はフィリピンに拠点を置く英会話学校と西日本にある大学との共同プロジェクトである。外国語不安を減らし、口頭コミュニケーションスキルに対して自信をつけ、動機づけを向上することを目的として、同期型のコンピュータ・メディア・コミュニケーション (Computer-mediated communication, CMC) のセッションを学期中に合計 4 回実施し、40 名の学部 1 回生が参加した。

**Keywords** Telecollaboration, Skype, Rubric, English Presentation

## 1. Introduction

The prevailing view of Japanese students' language abilities is negative, with a general belief amongst the public and academics that language education in Japan is ineffective [1]. In light of these opinions, and the increased importance of globalization, the Japanese government has been encouraging students to develop higher-level skills to compete and cooperate internationally. For example, the Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development stated its aims were, "to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan's

global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations" [2]. To accomplish this, the government promotes the development of language skills and advanced linguistic activities, like debates and classroom presentations.

This new focus on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) increases the onus on the learner to engage practically with others, in turn, generating new challenges in motivation and language-learning skills and anxiety.

## 2. Literature Review

Recent research on language-learning motivation has focused on the "ideal L2 self" and

its impact on motivation. [3] describes the “ideal L2 self” as a powerful motivator, because most learners would like to reduce discrepancies between their ‘present self’ and their “ideal L2 self.” [4] expands on this idea, saying students must develop a vivid idea of their L2 selves: “possible selves need to be something you can touch and feel, or that you are afraid of.” (p.9) [4] found a significant difference in levels of both international posture and willingness to communicate, when comparing students engaged in an actual L2 community—in this case, studying abroad—and students who did not.

[5] coined the term “international posture” to describe the stance that Japanese students take towards English. Instead of aiming to integrate or assimilate into the target language community, Japanese learners view English as a way to interact with the rest of the world. In Yashima’s study students who were interested in other cultures and enthusiastic about learning English were shown to hold international posture which in turn proved to be a strong factor in their willingness to communicate and motivation.

[6] define foreign-language anxiety as, "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors, related to classroom language learning, arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." Anxiety may also be associated with Communication Apprehension (CA), fear and avoidance of interaction, fear of negative evaluation, worry about other peoples' opinions and evaluations, and an expectation of negative evaluation [7]. In addition, [6] describe student discomfort at the disparity between high-level thinking skills and low-level linguistic skills. This disparity, and accompanying uncomfortable feelings, may result in students who are unwilling to communicate and exhibit a lack of motivation.

[8] explored the nature of silence in the second language classrooms of Japanese universities using quantitative methods and dynamic systems theory and found that silence was a “semi-permanent attractor state” (p.325) with students being “responsible for less than one per cent of initiated talk within their classes, while over a fifth of all class time observed was characterized by no oral participation by any participants, staff, or students alike.” [9] describes *attractor states* as either internally or externally created states which

pull students towards certain kinds of behavior, such as silence, and if this behavior becomes entrenched it requires a significant amount of energy to change it so that students will talk.

Much research has been undertaken on the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in language learning. CMC can benefit EFL students who often lack opportunities to interact with native speakers, [10]. [11] suggested the use of CMC increased learners’ motivation and reduced their language anxiety. [12] found that CMC facilitates second language learning and in particular synchronous video work can improve meaning negotiation.

Different CMC environments for example Skype, Facebook, YouTube and MSN have different features and emphasize different skills that language teachers can utilize. Skype provides audio, video and text modes. [13] describes Skype as a “disruptive technology” that allows us to undertake familiar tasks in new ways (p.9) especially related to oral communication. [14] found that synchronous communication on Skype provides an environment very similar to face-to-face interaction.

### 3. Objectives

The objectives of this research were to reduce levels of foreign language anxiety that students experience in the second language classroom in Japan, improve motivation, increase confidence in verbal skills. Secondly, by changing the classroom environment and the mode of communication we hoped to alter the perception of silence being the norm in language classrooms and create a new context in which the learners became more active participants and were responsible for a larger proportion of the classroom interaction simultaneously reducing the amount of silence in the classroom and increasing the amount of time students were responsible for interaction.

### 4. Participants

This online collaboration with Filipino teachers involved 40 first-year chemistry undergraduates at Kyoto Institute of Technology, a national university in Japan. There were two classes of twenty students, with three female students enrolled in each class, and one student from either

China or Malaysia. The Skype teachers were all from the Philippines.

## 5. Procedure

The four synchronous, online, computer-mediated sessions occurred during the second semester of the academic year. Students and teachers in Japan had been working together since the beginning of the first semester, so knew each other well. Since Japanese academic semesters run for four months each, one was scheduled session per month in October, November, December, and January.

In October, students were given all the information regarding each session, including topics covered. The students were assigned randomly to groups which remained the same for all four of the Skype sessions. During the class times when students were preparing and practicing for the Skype sessions they changed out of their Skype groups and worked with other people. The teachers changed groups for each Skype session.

Prior to each Skype session, students reviewed the topic, brainstormed a theme, and shared ideas, each student choosing a different aspect of the topic to study. For the session on Japanese culture, the students used *Glocal Studies* [3] developed at Kyoto University to help Japanese students explain Japanese culture in English. For example, when discussing Filipino life, one group of students chose “Industry in the Philippines,” and different members of the group shared information uncovered about agriculture, fishing, electronics, shipping and tourism. As homework, they researched and prepared a script, and the following week, practiced in groups, timing each other and critiquing presentations. In the final week, they undertook the sessions in their designated Skype groups.

## 6. The Sessions

When participating in Skype sessions, each student was assigned a role: presenter, timer and recorder, reporter, and questioner, with roles rotating each time the presenter changed.

The presenter spoke for five minutes; the timer kept time and recorded sessions on a second iPad; the reporter filled in a short questionnaire to give feedback to the presenter; and questioners were

responsible for developing questions for the presenter.

At the beginning of each session, students greeted the Filipino teacher, made small talk, and then began five-minute presentations. Presenters used an informal presentation style, followed by two minutes of feedback and questions by the Filipino teacher, and two minutes of questions and discussion with other students, totaling nine minutes. Each group was allotted one hour, so there was usually plenty of time for everyone to take a turn, and some time left over for a group chat with the teacher.

Session topics, in order, were:

- Self-introduction, describing the students’ lives since entering university
- Japanese culture
- Filipino-culture; and
- A freely chosen topic

The progression of topics, by design, increased in level of difficulty. In the first two sessions, the students were put in the role of “expert,” but in the third, roles were reversed, since the teachers were “experts” on Filipino culture. The complexity of the fourth session depended on the topic chosen.

After each individual session, students were asked to complete evaluation questionnaires during the sessions about themselves, concerning their performance, as well as other students’. The Filipino teachers gave immediate, verbal feedback to students following their presentations, commenting on positive aspects and advising on areas that needed work. They also provided written feedback on the sessions to the Japanese teachers, describing problems encountered, positive results, and whether or not students were improving.

## 7. Analysis

[15] use the focused essay technique to investigate students’ willingness to communicate in an L2. This methodology is used as, “A qualitative analysis of these situations provides a window into the thought processes of the students and highlights numerous interconnected and some-times conflicted features of the learner, (and) the communication context.” (p. 82). In this study after the four sessions had concluded the

participants were asked to write two essays describing their experiences using Skype to communicate in English with the teachers in the Philippines. One essay described the things they liked and the other described the aspects they disliked about it and both asked them to describe how they felt. The essays were written in class and were all written in English.

The essays were analyzed initially using open coding and the comments divided into major categories. They were then re-analyzed to identify reoccurring themes and were organized into relevant subordinate categories with five categories emerging: The perception that English had become easier and more natural, positive affect, international posture, increased motivation and personal growth.

### **7.1 Student Responses**

Overall, students responded very positively to the project. They were extremely nervous before the first session, and afterward, were exhausted, signifying the amount of energy required in this new context; however, they were pleasantly surprised they could make themselves understood in English.

Following are some examples of their comments organized according to the categories described above. The grammatical errors in students' responses have been presented uncorrected.

#### 1. English becoming easier and more natural

*"When I talked with them at last time I can speak fluently than for the first time."*

*"I like Skype class. At first I didn't like it. But as I taked part in this class, I came to feel funny to talk with Phillipins teacher. Then I thought English isn't as difficult as I expected."*

#### 2. Positive affect

*"About Skype, before I used Skype and talked with other country teachers, I didn't like to speak English. But I began to talk with them, more and more I like to speak English."*

*"I listened other students English and I learned*

*a lot of technics to communicate well, so I look forward to speak."*

#### 3. International posture

*"I have not often talk with foreign people. It was my precious experience."*

*"I had never known interesting point about English before this class. But I can notice about talking with foreigner is very very interesting."*

#### 4. Increased motivation

*"I listened other students English and I learned a lot of technics to communicate well, so I look forward to speak."*

*"Before English was for tests, now I can use English another way. I am fun."*

#### 5. Personal growth

*"I could grow up thanks to these opportunities."*

*"It was my precious experience"*

### **7.2 Filipino Teachers' Responses**

#### **7.2.1 Response to the students**

The Filipino teachers all noted that student confidence increased during the sessions. Examples of their comments include:

*"The students are more eager to speak about their topics and I can see that they have learned a lot from the previous presentations. They gained confidence while talking and more organized with their thoughts."*

*"Their presentation went well. Since this is the last session, I can see a lot of improvements on how they delivered their speeches. They are more confident now and they also interact well. They also prepared a lot of questions which is good."*

The teachers also commented on improved organization in student presentations:

“As for the preparation, I guess they have done it so well and really came up with a convincing presentation.”

### **7.2.2 Response to the project**

An important aspect of the sessions was the collaboration of the Filipino teachers with the students and the teachers in Japan, and the comments reflected this. Most of the teachers said they had learned a lot from their involvement, and it was a positive experience for them.

“First of all, I'd like to express my sincerest gratitude to the students for their full cooperation during the class. I had great fun and I learned a lot!”

In particular, one teacher's comment exemplified the spirit of the project

“I was happy to hear from students about 'the Philippines' in their presentation. Though they haven't been to my country yet, they were able to share something about Philippine culture. It's like we're creating a 'knowledge sharing culture' from students' presentations.”

The third session, on Filipino Culture, was the most enjoyable for both the Japanese students and the Filipino teachers. The students' presentations on different aspects of Filipino culture generated a lot of discussion between the presenters and the Filipino teachers, as well as the whole group. The teachers spontaneously messaged students with pictures and text explaining certain ideas raised in more detail.

One teacher comment was:

“They spoke with a bit of confidence without hesitation of what the topic about. They knew well about their topic and discussed about it though they knew their teachers were Filipinos. The information they shared was surprising indeed... That was a job well done for the students.”

## **8. Discussion**

### **Japanese perspective**

According to student responses, the sessions had a positive impact on both confidence levels and motivation to learn English. As stated above, the Filipino teachers all noted that student confidence increased as the sessions progressed. This is in line with [4], who found increased confidence to be associated with increased likelihood of engaging in interaction and more willingness to communicate. Based on these results, the sessions were useful in both these areas. The teachers also noted that students were willing to ask more questions, and were able to interact more smoothly.

Students noted that due to limited opportunities to use English in a practical way, they were grateful for the experience of talking to Filipino teachers. As well, they indicated that in some cases, the sessions influenced development of their international posture. For many students, the sessions certainly increased their motivations for speaking English, and changed their perspective on English language learning from negative to positive. The sessions were seen as something students could “touch and feel,” [5] and though they were nervous, and the results show this project helped students develop a more vivid image of their “ideal L2 self,” as discussed by [5] and [6].

The Filipino teacher's reference to a “knowledge sharing culture” indicates that a community of sorts was developed between teachers and the students, which provided a tangible experience for all.

To create a sense of community between teachers and students, the choice of topic seems to be key, and must be something with which both sides can connect.

A notable feature of the sessions was the lack of silence in the classroom. As mentioned earlier [9] found that in over a fifth of class time in Japanese university classrooms there was no oral interaction from any of the participants. However, in the Skype sessions there was negligible time in which there was no oral production from the participants. The students were constantly engaged in giving and evaluating their presentations, group discussions and classroom

organization with the Filipino teachers with little or no down time in which they could revert to the default position of silence. The dynamics of silence were significantly changed with the change in mode of communication.

### Filipino Perspective

The Filipino teachers' role in the classes was to listen to the students' presentations and give comments and feedback directly to the students, and to provide the grade to the teachers in Japan after the sessions. This type of class was new to the teachers as they usually teach 25 minute long private lessons in which the contents are dictated by standard materials from the company. Initially, the teachers found it difficult to manage the time and to give appropriate feedback. However, with experience they quickly became accustomed to the new lesson style and in the second year the classes ran much more smoothly. The key to the smooth running of the classes is training the teacher in the management of group lessons and clarifying their role to improve the dynamics between the students, and the students and the teachers. And importantly better communication between the teachers in Japan and the teachers in the Philippine is vital.

### 9. Conclusion

The Skype sessions, although limited in number, appeared to positively impact student confidence and motivation, decrease language anxiety and significantly reduce the amount of silence in the Japanese English language classroom. In the future, we would like to increase the number of sessions, to give students more opportunities to develop linguistic abilities, and would like to introduce pre- and post-testing to measure changes in linguistic ability.

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