Video Conferencing: Advantages and Limitations in Teaching Intercultural Communication in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract
The introduction of video conferencing platforms such as Skype, Adobe Connect, Marratech, etc., initiated a revolution in distance foreign language education. This new virtual classroom allows direct and instant interaction between teachers and students throughout the world, as well as among students themselves. Nonetheless, video conferencing also poses new challenges, such as the necessity of developing new teaching methodologies, pedagogies and modified syllabi. This new technology also generates difficulties and limitations due to the technological requirements needed for this interaction. Since current trends in foreign language education have shifted towards the promotion of intercultural communication competence which has its own specific teaching methods and tools, successful distance foreign language programs require innovative solutions that take into account both the developments in communication technology and intercultural educational perspectives in a synergistic way. The main focus of the paper is to bring together these two areas and to shed light on how the instant virtual language learning environment provided by video conferencing can help us in the implementation of the theory of intercultural communication in foreign language education. In order to examine this question, the paper presents a case study based on an action research designed for modifying a traditional beginners’ course in Chinese as a foreign language in Sweden. The research deals with revising the existing course syllabus, applying a task-based learning methodology and adding authentic video conferencing materials for the learners. The paper presents a pilot study that was conducted in order to explore the possibilities and limitations generated by video conferencing technology from the perspective of the theory of intercultural communication in foreign language education. The results of the study provide an important starting point for a new direction for research in this field.

1. Introduction
Since 1980s, linguists and other scholars in the West have advocated the importance of enhancing students’ intercultural communication competence in foreign language education. Teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) faces similar challenges. Yet the intercultural communication perspective is a new trend in CFL and its implementation and evaluation is still under development. So far, the advocates of new trends in CFL (Lv, 1994; Liu, 2007; Peng, 2007; Zhou, 1997) have focused almost exclusively on classroom-based courses. However, in order to catch up with the main trend of foreign-language education, there is also a need to implement the cross-cultural dimension into distance courses at institutions such as in Dalarna University (Sweden), where I currently work. Dalarna University started to provide web-based courses in the Chinese language in 2007. Since 2010, the Chinese language courses have been available only in the distance form using the same teaching materials as the previous campus-based courses. However, the textbooks used in both settings basically followed the traditional grammar-centered approach. Therefore, a pilot study was carried out at Dalarna University to explore the opportunities for implementing a cross-cultural perspective into existing courses and evaluating the effectiveness of this implementation based on the feedback of the students and the experience of the teacher/researcher.

2. Action Research in CFL – A Case Study in Sweden
According to McKernan (1996: 1) the curriculum can be improved through action research and the teachers and other educators are best suited to conduct such inquiries. Unfortunately, research about teaching CFL in distance mode is extremely limited. Only Wang (2004a, b) provides an empirical study of video conferencing with eight distance language learners of Chinese, and she explores the capabilities of the video conferencing tool NetMeeting and participants’ perceptions of the new learning environment. According to Wang, the new generation video conferencing tools, such as NetMeeting, allow for better audiovisual interaction between teacher and students and greatly enrich the learning environment for language learners in virtual spaces.
Dalarna University was the first university to offer web-based CFL courses in Sweden. Those courses offered several channels of communication between teachers and students, such as asynchronous document exchange, email, text chat on “Fronter” (the main online communication platform), and our online lectures in synchronous video conferencing (Marratech and later on, Adobe Connect), providing audiovisual interaction. Despite technical problems which limited the use of all the asynchronous and synchronous tools online (Cunningham, Beers Fägersten & Holmsten, 2010), most of the teaching pedagogies, such as role-play, discussions, writing exercises, etc., could be carried out with synchronous video conferencing (Rosenquist, 2008). This confirms Wang’s (2004a, b) research and suggests that videoconferencing indeed can be a successful tool in promoting students’ intercultural communication competence.

2.1 Research Setting
The pilot study was implemented in spring 2011 as the first attempt to implement the intercultural communication approach into a distance Chinese language course for the beginners at Dalarna University (Chinese 1).

To follow the five phrases of an action research cycle demonstrated by Susman (1983), I first reviewed the current course syllabus, textbook and the teaching materials. Special attention was placed on the approach and methodology used from the perspective of intercultural communication. The materials used in the textbook were also reviewed to see how they reflected the hidden cultural elements in the language.

The next step was to make changes in the teaching plan. In online classes of Chinese 1, students did experience a wide range of interactive activities. However, since most of the students are English-speaking Swedes in Sweden, they have limited chances to practice the Chinese language outside their virtual classroom. Therefore, I arranged for each of my Swedish students to interview a Chinese student who is studying at the Dalarna University. The main task of the Swedish students was to use the learned vocabulary and sentence patterns to find out basic personal information about the Chinese students. Swedish students received a list of questions (in English) and were instructed to interview the native Chinese students in the virtual classroom.

The activity was first attempted on a volunteer basis outside of the students’ regular class schedule. However, due to the extremely low participation, I decided to implement this activity into the regular course schedule, so that in the end two groups of students (a total of 24 students) were able to participate in these interviews during the class.

A follow-up questionnaire for Swedish students was designed to find out what they thought about the interviews, what type of problems they encountered and whether their expectations were successfully met. A set of four multiple-choice and four open-ended questions allowed the students to evaluate both their experiences in using Chinese during the interviews and the specific internet-based communication technology that was utilized.

I also prepared a questionnaire for the Chinese students to learn their views on the effectiveness of this form of teaching the Chinese language and their assessment of the Swedish students’ communication skills, again with a focus on intercultural communication.

2.2 Data Collection
Despite some difficulties, the data that was collected provided a solid foundation for further exploration. Since the majority of students decided not to participate in the interviews outside the classroom, it was necessary to make this activity a part of the regular lecture series. A short introduction about this activity was given to the Swedish students one week before the interviews took place. A briefing was also given to the Chinese students to ensure that they would be capable of participating in the planned video conference interviews. They were also given information about the objectives of the research and their role in the interviews.

During the lectures, some students were not willing to join the activity as they claimed that they had not advanced enough to participate in these interviews. Those students were allowed to interview each other in order to fulfill the task of that lecture, but they were excluded from the pilot research.

2.3 Data Analysis
After the interview activity, 10 Swedish students and 7 of their Chinese counterparts submitted the questionnaires. In general, the results showed that the Swedish students were not really aware of the cross-cultural aspect of the communication, and -- together with their Chinese partners -- were focusing mostly on more basic language skills, such as pronunciation, listening comprehension and
the use of basic vocabulary. Some students also focused on difficulties with the communication technology which negatively affected some of the interviews.

It seems that in this early stage of language learning, the cross-cultural elements of communication do not have many opportunities to come to the center of attention. Beginners need to use basic phrases and sentence patterns which can be easily understood. The native Chinese speakers in turn did not have high expectations for their Swedish interview partners and were happy to clarify unclear issues during the interviews.

In general, the Chinese students “somewhat managed to understand” their Swedish counterparts or even claimed that they “understood them very well”. The difficulties in communication were often attributed to typical beginners’ issues such as “strange pronunciation of words”, “use of unintelligible words and phrases”, limited vocabulary in general and “grammatical mistakes”. Chinese students solved these communication problems by writing the words and phrases for the Swedish students on the computer screen or by switching to English and explaining the problem. They also asked the Swedish students to repeat their utterances if they did not understand them.

Some of the Chinese students were pleasantly surprised by the oral skills of the Swedish students; some noted that some culturally-related vocabulary was not properly understood by the Swedish students. One Chinese student noted that the Swedish student “presented things in a strange way” and that the “responses did not make sense”, which could indicate an intercultural communication problem. One example was that a Swedish student referred to his own wife as “taitai” instead of “qizi”, which confused the native Chinese speaker and led him to believe that the Swedish student’s family had 4 generations. Only after the Swedish student told the Chinese student that his wife was older than him, did the Chinese student finally understand his meaning. Some Chinese students also noted that some culturally-related concepts were not properly understood by the Swedish students, as shown by their vocabulary choices. This indicates that some of the Chinese students could notice issues related to the intercultural aspect of learning CFL even at the beginning level.

Swedish students who submitted the forms were generally positive about their experience, even though many of them just “somewhat managed to understand” the Chinese students. The basic problem was the “use of unknown words and phrases” by the Chinese students, who also sometimes “spoke very fast”. They also noted their own inability to conduct a longer dialogue due to their limited vocabulary and conversational skills at this early stage of learning the language. In addition, some of them wrote that these conversations with Chinese students provided them with a better understanding of how the Chinese language is used in real conversations (in contrast to typical textbook dialogues). From this point of view, their experience could also be related to aspects of intercultural communication.

3. Conclusions

In order to enhance the intercultural communication skills of the Swedish students, I added a relatively realistic scenario of an interview with a Chinese student to the regular schedule of the internet-based CFL class. While the stated aim of the activity was to test the learned skills in a “real situation” with a native speaker, I also wanted to evaluate the sensitivity of the students to issues related to intercultural communication in the process of learning the Chinese language and to gain insight about how successful their “intercultural communication” was from the viewpoint of the native speakers. The internet-based nature of the course also had unique challenges. Some Chinese and Swedish students did not participate for varied reasons: the Chinese students were often discouraged by the complicated communication technology while Swedish students claimed they were too “busy”. In a few cases, the technical problems affected the whole activity or simply forced the sessions to stop. On the other hand, the internet-based interviews allowed the Swedish students to meet Chinese students in a virtual classroom, which is difficult to arrange when students are located in different parts of the country.

According to the principles of action research, the completion of this first cycle of the activity signals the beginning of the next one. Further revision and modification of the activity will be carried out in the future implementation of this research.
References


