May 2010

# Business Japanese Through Internet-Based Videoconferencing

Shoji Azuma
*University of Utah*

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl

Shoji Azuma
*University of Utah*

# BUSINESS JAPANESE THROUGH INTERNET-BASED VIDEOCONFERENCING

INTRODUCTION

Today, nobody can deny the fact that we live in an increasingly integrated world economy and that business communication across cultures is crucial to our success in international business. Within this context, teaching skills and concepts for effective global communication is more and more expected from foreign language teachers in institutions with as traditional departments of languages as well as Business Schools in higher education.

Foreign language instruction has long been traditionally considered at the forefront of internationalizing or globalizing our students on campus. Although we have been striving for the efficiency of foreign language teaching, there are fundamental and intrinsic barriers to our efforts. One of them is that access to the target language is extremely limited once students are outside of the classroom. This is especially the case in so called less-commonly-taught languages such as Japanese. For example, face-to-face conversations with native speakers are almost impossible unless students participate in a program such as study abroad or a foreign internship. However, such participation requires students' commitment of time and money, and not many students can afford to do so. Hence, the majority of our language instruction has been grounded in the classroom setting, which has limited resources, although various attempts have been made to maximize such resources (e.g., Fukada 1999, Grair 2002, Kikuchi and Shinzato 1998).

We will report on a project of developing a content-based Japanese language course by integrating the technology of Internet (ISDN) communication with university students in Japan. We have set up a course in which our students can actively engage in exchanging views/ideas synchronically with peer students in Japan through a TV monitor and a mi-

crophone in our classroom on campus, once a month for about 60 minutes. Our students have opportunities to see, speak and listen to Japanese college students while they are in the U. S. classroom, via the audio-visual monitor connected to the Internet. They do not have to travel all the way to Japan, or any place for that matter. They simply go to their regular classroom as they normally do, where they experience a real on-line face-to-face meaningful communication with Japanese students in Japan.

CASE STUDY: BUSINESS JAPANESE

Previous studies suggest that the use of distance learning facilities and computing options has become a practical and effective method of teaching in foreign language instruction as well as in culture courses (e.g., Eddy 1989, Katz 2001, Kinginger et al, 1999). Lee and VanPatten (1995) point out the importance of integrating authentic oral as well as written components in language teaching. Especially, they argue that materials in textbooks often do not truly represent how the native speakers use their language in actual settings. The two-way simultaneous videoconferences with native speakers are an engaging alternative for students who have been raised in a milieu of television and video games. Traditionally, most students have no choice but to learn a new language through written texts or textbooks which are sometimes boring and how television is familiar and fun for most students.  In this type of learning environment, students do not get enough opportunities to use the language orally in meaningful situations or have to practice with peers who are non-native speakers with similar backgrounds. Students have a real encounter with native speakers who speak to them and respond spontaneously to what they have to say.

Thus, television conferencing with native speakers can be indeed an exciting, authentic and fun way to learn a language. However, because it is relatively new and also requires preparation from both parties in two countries, it often tends to end as a one time eye-catching event without any continuity. For example, Katz (2001) reports on videoconferencing in French language instruction, but it appears that only a handful of sessions were conducted. The present study is a report of videoconferencing which is embedded in our regular curriculum as an on-going project.


*Course goal:*

Every single course starts with a particular goal to be accomplished. The goal may be specific to each institution, college, or program. For example, the business school, the foreign languages department, and the corporate training program may have their own respective goals, which might be different from one another. The course described here has been offered through the Department of Languages and Literature at the University of Utah. Basically, the Department has the following two goals:

(1) To educate students so that they can function effectively in a contemporary global environment.

(2) To acquire a critical comprehensive understanding of diverse cultures.

An important point to be noted is that the goal is not just to improve language skills but also to enhance and stimulate cultural understanding of diverse communities. In other words, the course is not merely a language course, but it is a content course that aims at students' intellectual growth and cultural awareness.

Thus, the course's emphasis goes beyond aspects of language such as business-related specialized vocabularies and expressions, because these terms are best learned in actual specific business settings. Even if students learn the technical vocabulary (e.g., banking) in class, they quickly forget it after the course is over because they do not use what they have memorized on a constant basis. Furthermore, because students' interests are so diverse (e.g., banking, manufacturing, trade, high tech industry, tourism), it is almost impossible to find a set of specialized vocabulary which every student is motivated to learn.

In terms of linguistic skills, the receptive one was set as our focus: for American students to understand Japanese native speakers, and for Japanese students to understand English native speakers. It would of course be ideal if our students could improve both receptive and productive skills. However, while every student may not have an ample opportunity to speak, all students can actively listen during the conference. Thus, we decided to focus on improving receptive skills as the major goal. With respect to the content matters to be dealt with in the sessions, it was decided to select a series of topics that are general enough for everyone and also give students ample opportunity to learn about Japanese culture and

business. In other words, we decided not to focus on one particular aspect of Japanese business. This approach of incorporating various aspects of contemporary Japanese society also helped students to reflect on their own culture and business. The general goal and approach was discussed and agreed upon with Japanese counterparts in Japan.

*Students:*

American students were enrolled in an advanced Japanese course titled Business Japanese. They had completed at least two years of Japanese and their oral level was estimated to be intermediate-high to advanced-mid on the scale of the Oral Proficiency Interview. Japanese students in Japan were enrolled in an advanced oral English course. All Japanese students had completed six years of English courses at junior and senior high schools before entering college. For the American students, the course was designed to meet students' needs for their future careers related to business with Japan and with Japanese people. In terms of class size, both American and Japanese classes had about 10-15 students. We considered that more than 15 would hinder the efficiency of class participation by reducing the opportunity for students to speak.

*Topics:*

During the planning stage, both American and Japanese students were asked about the topics to be dealt with in the videoconference. The following list illustrates some of the topics used in the video-sessions:

- Finding a job
- A part-time job and its significance in finding a full-time job
- Gender in the workplace
- Promotion/Retirement
- Trade frictions
- Foreign workers in business
- U.S. military presence in Japan
- Japanese history textbooks in Japan
- President Bush and his foreign policy
- Bilingualism
- Hobby and leisure time

The topics were selected in such a way as to represent students' interests as much as we could. Generally, for each session, one topic was se-

lected and relevant reading materials were assigned to both American and Japanese students. The materials were taken from various Japanese and English texts including newspapers (e.g., *Yomiuri Shinbun*, *New York Times*), journals (e.g., *Bungei Shunju*, *Newsweek*), and books (e.g., *Koodansha Bilingual Books*, *Business Japanese*). Students were asked to read the assigned materials beforehand and prepare for each session. On some occasions, several specific questions based on the reading assignment were given to students, and they were asked to prepare their own answers before the sessions.

*Actual session*

The conferences were conducted by using a two-way audio and video-equipped classroom that has a 35-inch TV screen with picture-in-picture, a remote control camera, a portable microphone, and a VHS player and recorder. The image on the screen was large enough for all students to watch. They were able to watch their counterparts in Japan as well as themselves using the picture-in-picture function. The remote control camera was able to zoom in on a student who was speaking. The Japanese university had the same arrangement in their classroom. The connection was made using ISDN phone lines. The cost for the connection was about $100 per session (60 minutes) and was paid by the Japanese university. During the session, a technical assistant was standing by in the classroom and readily available if any unexpected technical difficulties occurred. During any given 60 minutes session, both American and Japanese students were asked to use Japanese in the first half of the session and English in the last half. This language arrangement was made to ensure that both sides would have their linguistic goals met (e.g., American students want to hear and speak Japanese).

FINDINGS

In the sessions, students experienced real communication by using the target language in meaningful situations. Unlike traditional language learning with a textbook, students had to use the language to understand and convey a message with native speakers of their age. Importantly, they experienced that real communication often involves many incomplete sentences, misunderstanding, frustration, amusement, and occasional embarrassment. We thought that all these were an integral part of language learning.

*Miscommunication and culture*

Many students expressed that they had the opportunity not only to speak and listen to native speakers of the target language but also to learn more about the target culture. For example, students learned that miscommunication is a part of normal communication and that they had to negotiate the miscommunication by various methods such as re-phrasing and repeating. The following segment shows that Japanese students did not understand a question about a job due to cultural differences and that American students had to re-phrase the question.

> American student A: Do any of you have a job?
> Japanese students: [they look around at one another not knowing
>        what the question means]
> American students A: Do any of you have a job while attending
>        the university?
> Japanese students: [they still look around at one another]
> American student B: Do any of you work while going to school?
> Japanese students: [still they cannot comprehend the question]
> American student A: How many of you have part-time jobs?
> Japanese students: [six of the Japanese students raise their hand]

After several rephrasings, Japanese students finally comprehended the question with the help of the word "part-time job." The misunderstanding by the Japanese is due to the cultural difference that the word "job" means a full-time job and that a "part-time" job is not considered a job in Japan. With this exchange, American students learned that the Japanese consider only a full-time job, held by non-students, is a "real" job with full responsibility, and that a part-time job is considered very lightly, one without much responsibility or respect. American students learn that even such a simple word as "job" can be the source of misunderstanding and that culture plays a significant role in communication.

*Communication style*

Through the videoconference, students learned that the way people speak (or do not speak) is different from culture to culture. The following segment shows that a Japanese communication style can be different from that of average American speech. American students brought up the controversial topic of the Yasukuni Shrine, a site of worship for the war

dead. Whenever the Japanese Prime Minister or his cabinet members pay an official visit to Yasukuni Shrine, neighboring Asian countries strongly protest against the visit. American students asked the Japanese about their opinion.

> American student C: On any of your trips, do any of you go to the Yasukuni Shrine?
>
> Japanese students: [laugh]
>
> Japanese student A: [looks at other students and after a while, smiles] No . . . [little laugh]
>
> American student C: Mr. Koizumi [Prime Minister] will go there, are you going to go there with him?
>
> Japanese students; [laugh, look at one another]
>
> Japanese student B: I have never gone there.
>
> American student C: Have any of you ever been there? Raise your hand.
>
> Japanese student B: No . . . [silence]
>
> American student C: Raise your hand.
>
> Japanese student D: [looks around and finally raises her hand and laughs while raising it]

American students expect lively discussion from Japanese students. Instead, Japanese students simply laugh at the question while looking at one another. One American student pursues the topic by citing the Prime Minister's visit and tries to relate his visit to them and hopes that Japanese students will respond to the question. Again, Japanese students look at one another and stay relatively quiet. The American student then asks them to raise their hands if they had visited the Shrine. Again, his continuous effort is met with minimal response from the Japanese students. This may reinforce the stereotypical image of the Japanese that they are generally quiet and shy. However, as the video sessions were continued, American students realized that their communication style tends to be too direct, ignoring the Japanese preference of maintaining conformity within their group, as well as with the interlocutor.

American students realized that Japanese often look at one another before expressing their own view, and began to understand Japanese avoidance strategy in any potential conflict-evolving situation where the

difference in opinion may cause a problem for the relationship. One American student described his experience as follows:

> The expression of self opinion is something that is rarely heard. I, like many foreigners, at first made the assumption that this was a result of the Japanese simply not having opinions. — I was quite disappointed. — However, through participation in the videoconference, I was able to realize that there is not a lack of personal opinion in Japanese society, the Japanese are just selective about how and when that opinion is expressed. When the opinions were given, it was usually after several of the Japanese students had counseled with each other. — These reasons being the need for conformity, and the avoidance of conflict.

*Students' feedback*

At the conclusion of a series of sessions, American students were asked to answer questions about the videoconference in general. The following is a sample of questions and students' responses.

> Q: Did you find going to the conferences helpful in any way? (on a five-point scale with 1 being a waste of time, and 5 being very helpful)
> A: The average score was 4.6, which is considered very high. Almost all students found the videoconferencing very helpful in advancing their language skills and cultural knowledge. One student stated that "the ability to speak spontaneously face to face with people 6,000 miles away quickened our strides toward cultural understanding."

> Q: What do you find helpful?
> A: The aspect all students found helpful was the interaction between Japanese and American students and the opportunity to be able to practice Japanese with native speakers and also to meet new Japanese friends. In some cases, Japanese students visited American students in the U.S. (or the reverse) and they renewed their friendships, which were established through the TV medium.

> Q: Would you like to see a set topic discussion or would you like
> to see a free and open discussion about anything?
> A: About 70% of the students preferred a set topic discussion to a
> free and open one. They responded by saying that set topics are
> easier to prepare for, more organized, and that set topics give stu-
> dents something to talk about. On the other hand, about 20% of
> them preferred a free and open discussion by giving the reason
> that they feel they can talk about their own interests.

The results of the questionnaire indicate that our students consider the videoconference to be an efficient and enjoyable way to learn the target language and culture. It excites them to see and talk with native speakers in a friendly environment. Generally, they prefer organized sessions with fixed topics so that they can readily participate.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

*Finding colleagues abroad*

The most important factor for the success of the project is to find a foreign colleague who is as committed to videoconferencing as you are. Without a dependable foreign colleague, it is impossible to carry out the videoconference project. If possible, it is highly desirable to meet the colleague in person before the onset of the project. If the nature of the project is just a one-time extra-curricular activity, then you may not need to meet the colleague in person. However, if the project is to be consi-dered a part of the regular curriculum and continuity is expected, a per-sonal meeting will significantly enhance the execution of the videoconfe-rencing. Furthermore, it should be noted that sharing commitment is not enough for success. As a rule of thumb, the project may not work well if the foreign colleague says that he/she is enthusiastic but does not respond to an e-mail inquiry in a timely manner.

One may be able to find such a colleague through various sources such as attendance at international conferences, sister school relation-ships, and study abroad programs.

*Academic schedule and time difference*

It is often the case that the academic calendar between two countries is quite different. For example, a typical spring semester in Japan goes from

April to late July. Their fall semester goes from the end of September to the middle of January. This creates a potential problem in securing students for the session. For example, during our typical spring semester, most Japanese students do not attend school. Thus, a Japanese instructor needs to make an extra effort in order to hold videoconference sessions during this period. Furthermore, the factor of time zone differences between two countries has to be considered in scheduling. There is a 16-hour time difference between Japan and the U.S. (MST). Thus, the American class was scheduled as an evening class which started at 6:00pm, while the Japanese class was scheduled as a morning class which started at 10:00am.

*Technical preparation*

It is absolutely crucial to have a test session with the foreign institution to make sure that the equipment works before the first session. Ideally, this test session should be performed at least two weeks before the actual session in order to ensure enough time to solve any potential technical problems. If the second test session does not go through, a third test session has to be performed. Common adjustments include calling a different phone number and changing settings for better reception, relocating a room, and adjusting the seating arrangement. It is best to have a technical assistant physically present during at least the first several sessions. Even after the instructor has gained familiarity with the equipment, he/she may touch a wrong button in a control panel by mistake during the session, and may not be able to recover the settings for the entire session. Furthermore, any unexpected mishap may occur at the partner's classroom and the instructor may need to act quickly to solve the problem. It would be extremely difficult for the instructor to handle all those technical aspects while maintaining a smooth flow in the class.

*Turn-taking*

In the sessions, a portable microphone was moved to whichever student wanted to speak. The quality of the microphone was so good that anyone in its vicinity was able to speak and his or her voice was picked up and clearly heard by the Japanese students. One potential problem with turn-taking is that speaking can be dominated by a limited number of students who are more active than the rest of the class, although the re-

ceptive skills (e.g., listening, understanding) can be equally practiced by all participants.

In order to avoid this potential problem, students were asked not to monopolize speaking, and were encouraged to let other students have a chance to speak. In addition, the instructor occasionally intervened and asked other students to speak. However, it was important that students were not forced to speak. This is because their learning style may be different from one another and some prefer learning by observation rather than active participation (i.e., speaking). The instructor's role was kept minimal in the sessions. We aimed to create a student-centered atmosphere in which real spontaneous communication was being initiated and carried on by students themselves rather than the teacher. We wanted our students to "forget" that they were in a language classroom and experience genuine encounters with native speakers of the target language.

IMPLICATIONS

Videoconferencing has the potential to significantly enhance our language/culture teaching by providing students with spontaneous, naturally occurring discourse. The technological innovation allows students to have a face-to-face learning experience with native speakers of the target language without even leaving their home country.

What students experience in the videoconferencing is task-oriented, authentic, relevant, and meaningful to them. It complements the traditional classroom instruction with an opportunity for live communication. As more and more institutions acquire the necessary hardware and software, videoconferencing can be applied to other subjects such as world history and international business courses in addition to language courses. For example, it would be extremely beneficial for students in a world history class to get different viewpoints about certain historical events from nationals of other countries. Videoconferencing helps them to get a balanced view and understanding about world history, which may be written and taught from one particular country's viewpoint. Students in international business courses will surely benefit from videoconferencing by discussing current trade issues and business practices with students in the target country. Given the fact that English is a truly international language, videoconferencing in English can be readily expanded with various countries in Asia, Europe and other parts of the world. It is collaborative, experimental and innovative, and it has the potential to be applied in

the wide array of courses we offer in our institutions. Videoconferencing offers a new tool for us to globalize our campus and its people.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Azuma, S. and Sambongi, R. (2001). *Business Japanese*. New York: Georgetown UP.

Eddy, B. D. (1989). "Interactive tele-classes from Germany." *Modern Technology in Foreign Language Education: application and projects*. Ed. W. F. Flint Smith. Chicago: National Textbook Co. 211-217.

Fukada, A. (1999). "Teaching technical reading with technology." *Global Business Languages. Technological Advances, Electronic Data and Languages for Specific Purposes*. 27-41.

Grair, C. (2002). "Experiential learning in business German workshops." *Global Business Languages. Communication and Commerce*. 105-123.

Katz, S. (2001). "Videoconferencing with the French-speaking world: A user's guide." *Foreign Language Annals*. 34 (2). 152-158.

Kikuchi, M. and Shinzato, R. (1998). "An integrated approach in business Japanese: Connecting the classroom to the outside business world and volunteer groups." *Global Business languages. Networking with the Business Community*. 35-58.

Kinginger, C., Gourves-Hayward, A., and Simpson, V. (1999). "A tele-collaborative course on French-American intercultural communication." *The French Review*. 72. 853-866.

Lee, J. F., and Van Patten, B. (1995). *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen*. New York: McGraw-Hill.