

Visual Reconstruction of BBS Interaction – The Effect of Combination of On-Line Intercultural Communication and Reflective Activities in Foreign Language Learning –

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Abstract

This study attempts to develop a tool for on-line conversation, which facilitates interactions for learning of foreign languages and cultures. Japanese college students at Future University- Hakodate and college students at East Tennessee State University, U.S.A., communicated each other in English, using our originally developed BBS from June to July 2002. This paper observes the communication activity and also the follow-up off-line reflective activity to explore better BBS functions. Students' output during the reflective activities shows the importance of reconstructing their BBS-based conversations for learning of intercultural communication.

Key Words or Phrases: Inter-Cultural Communication, On-line, Off-line, Personalization. Tool Development

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to explore effective ways to promote students' foreign language learning and cultural awareness in authentic ways with the combination of on-line interactions and follow-up reflective activities. Learners of English in Japan are not in abundant authentic target language and cultural resources while most of them learn English in more artificial learning environment in off-line situations.

A number of papers argue that optimal foreign language learning environment should:

- 1) include authenticity of the target language and culture,
- 2) promote learners' cultural awareness, and
- 3) utilize interlanguage that learners use in classroom activities.

Reference [1] emphasizes learners' practical flexibility toward different cultures other than limiting their cultural awareness as

knowledge itself, suggesting that learners should experience role-playings and simulation games in order to acquire the flexibility. Reference [3] also promotes learning of cultures as one of the vital parts to improve learners' foreign language proficiency.

Demanded above, simulation games to offer students' intercultural experiences have been conducted and developed all over the world ([5]-[7].) In addition, in order to find out efficacy of interlanguage use for foreign language teaching, "learner corpus" has been developed and adopted ([4]).

Following the research above, today, authentic international and/or intercultural exchange in on-line environment has been provided to facilitate students' language and cultural awareness in universities and high schools ([2], [8]).

This paper describes how learners have learned English as a foreign language and how they have learned intercultural matters through one classroom experiment. The experiment involves learners' mutual learning, on-line communication and also off-line communication activity in one context.

A key distinguishing feature of this experiment is the "reflection activity", which is conducted after on-line communication in order to visualize on-line communication. This paper describes how on-line communication has effectiveness to learn intercultural matters, and how off-line activity can optimize it.

II. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

A. ACTIVITY CONDUCTED WITH BBS

One series of classroom activities was conducted in June-July, 2002, in the course called Communication, at Future University-Hakodate in Japan (hereafter FUN). Communication Course aims to let students experience authentic foreign language use and culture.

The FUN students in the course communicated with students of Japanese at East Tennessee State University in U.S.A

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(hereafter ETSU.) The students talked about their life, culture, study field, etc, selecting their favorite categories to join. Forty students of FUN and 12 students of ETSU were involved in this activity. Their online communication log has been saved as the data.

They exchanged their messages in English, using an on-line system called Bulletin Board System (hereafter BBS), which was originally developed by this research group.

In the Communication Course at FUN, the instructor, M. Yokoyama, gave students feedback on their postings, regarding English usage, vocabulary, phrases, and further useful expressions before starting each class. Following the feedback session, students read new postings and posted their messages in and after class. While students reading and writing activity with BBS, the instructor walked around to help students' on-line reading and writing activity.

B. ORIGINAL BBS

In order to create optimal learning environment, the originally BBS has been implemented based on the activity which was conducted in the previous semester with a ready-made BBS.¹

The original BBS has been implemented so that it holds the following outcomes:

- 1) *Easy to post short messages*
- 2) *Easy to follow communication threads*
- 3) *Easy to select/pick up topics*

In order to shape those outcomes, the BBS has the following specifications:

1) Optional Sorting Function

Students can select how to sort out the whole BBS messages: new posts on the tops by thread, by new thread with new posts, by new posts, by old posts on the top by thread, by old posts with new threads, and by old posts (Fig.1).

2) Compact Reply Screen

The reply message box has been set up relatively small and narrow so that students could get out of pressure of writing long messages (Fig.2).

3) Uniquely Threaded View Screen

Threaded view screen includes not only information on senders' name, date, titles, but also the first few words of each body message so that students could see the whole discourse to some extent rather than focusing on one body message (Fig.1.)

4) Category Setting

Eight categories are set so that students can select and post their categories that they are interested in smoothly (Fig.1.).

Furthermore, the BBS has profile information linked; students can input their pictures and their profile messages (Fig.3).²

The BBS is available to view and is linked from <http://www.fun.ac.jp/~yokoyama/>.

¹ Authors thank to H. Weintraub, professor at Future University-Hakodate, as the person who kindly offered his server and his BBS during November-December 2001.

² On questionnaire sheets after BBS activity, students have made their comments that they were able to post their short messages comfortably.

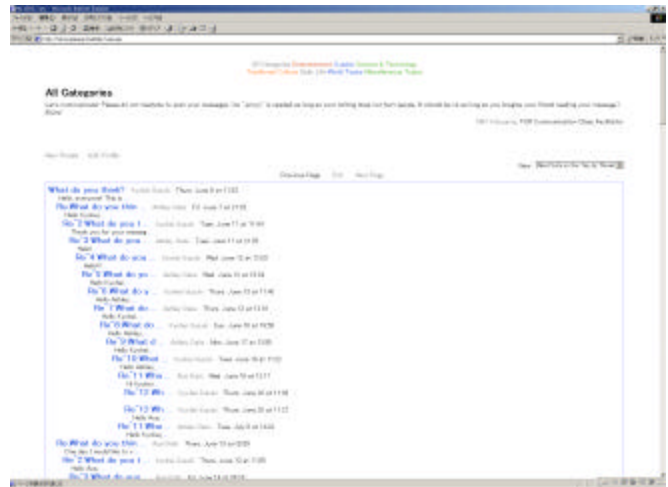


Fig. 1: Original BBS (View Screen)



Fig. 2: Original BBS (for Replying)



Fig. 3: Original BBS (Profile Screen)

C. FOLLOW-UP OFF-LINE REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY

After the BBS activity in July 2002, follow-up off-line activity was prepared for FUN students, to promote their further cultural awareness. The reflective activity was conducted in two class periods as follows.

1. The First Class Period

In the first class period, students put their conversation threads printed out on paper on the wall, and the students wrote and posted their comments, newly learned information, rethought, etc., on it (See Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 below).



Fig. 4: Group-Thread Reflection in the First Class Period

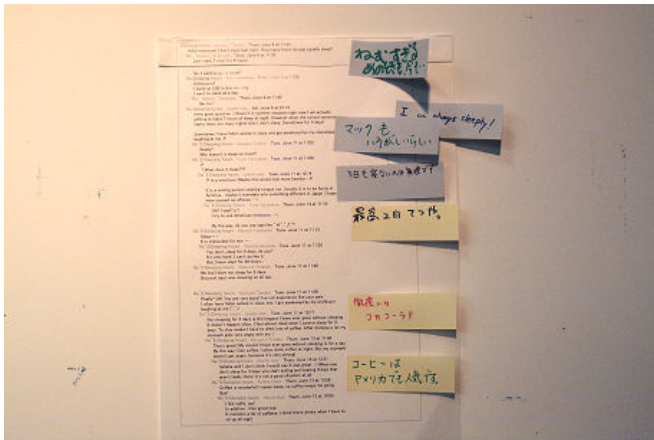


Fig. 5: Group-Thread Reflection in the First Class Period (Zoomed)

2. The Second Class Period

In the second class period, a space on white walls in a spacious room was provided for each student. Students created their own history of their previous communication using BBS on the wall. The following Figure 6 and Figure 7 show some of the students' work.

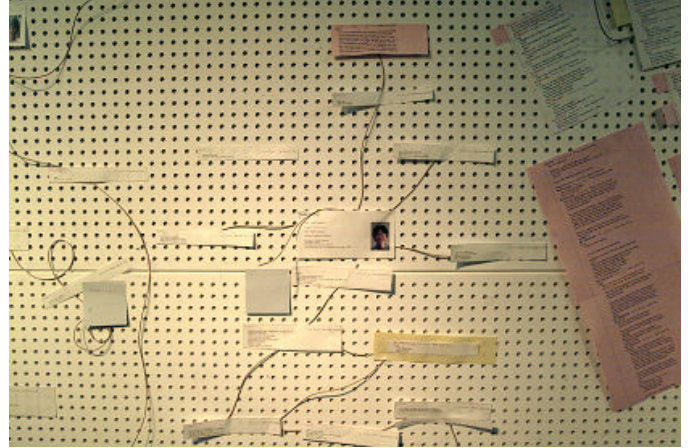


Fig. 6: Individual-Thread Reflection in the Second Class Period 1

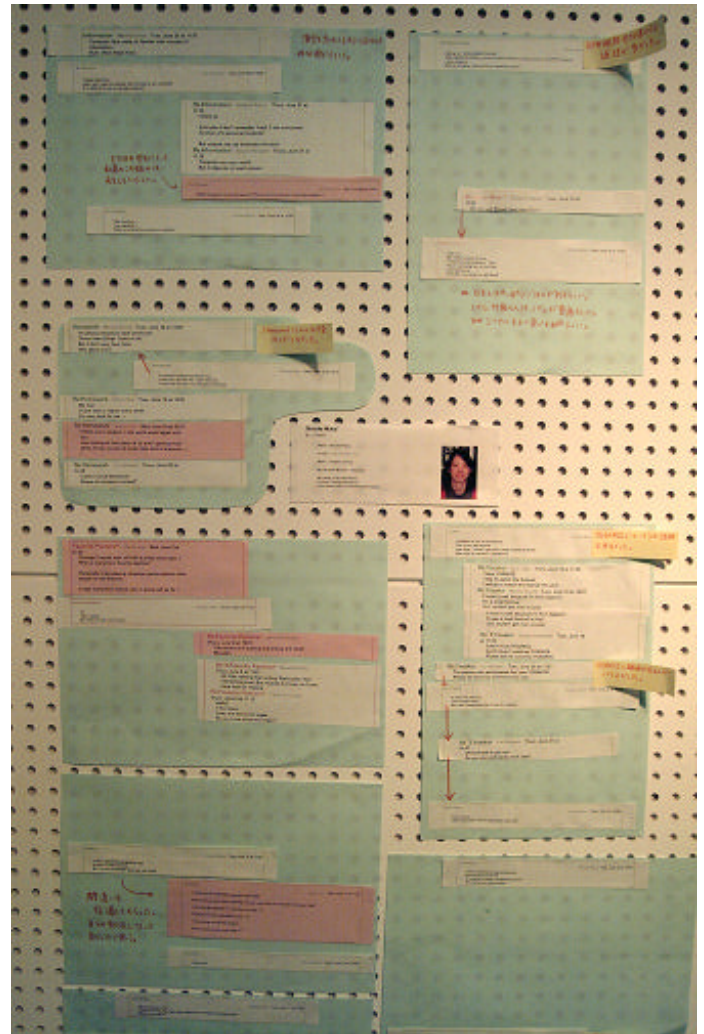


Fig. 7: Individual-Thread Reflection in the Second Class Period 2

III. FINDINGS

This experiment indicates that students get lower anxiety to post their messages in English and are motivated to post their messages with the BBS. It facilitates their communication between FUN and ETSU on-line and facilitates their cultural awareness.³

At first, throughout this activity, FUN students not only experienced communication with ETSU students in English, but also have learned intercultural matters. Here are FUN students' written comments after whole BBS activity: both of on-line and off-line. The following #1-2 are FUN students' comments that show they have learned difference of cultures between FUN students and ETSU students. (The following messages are not edited but are as they have written):

1) *I knew American emotional icon for first time in this BBS. It was very interesting for me! It is difficult to understand, because it is seen from side. Japanese emotional icon is very different from them.*

2) *I learned various things from ETSU students. The thing what I was interesting is emoticons. The character of emoticons used by ETSU students are that their upside is coming to left side. For example, :P, :O and so on. I couldn't understand these emoticons when I saw them at first. Emoticons used by us are (^?^), o(_ _)o, (` ? ^) and so on.*

Secondly, it should be noted that FUN students autonomously noticed the similarity of cultures between FUN and ETSU students. That would be one of the most valuable learning strategies for FUN students in that they have almost no chance to interact with international college students in their daily life. The following comments by students, #3-6, indicate that they have noticed either similarity of two cultures or similar feeling between FUN and ETSU students.

3) *Our cultures are different. But everyday things were not so different as I imagined.*

4) *When I read their replies, I thought that nothing was different in America. All students have dream and try hard to come true.*

5) *What I was able to tell ETSU students is that our Japanese can communicate for you to use some common subject. And then, we can become good friends.*

6) *I learned life of ETSU students. They also drink coffee when they are sleepy and are busy. I felt that ETSU students differed little from us. Finally, I was surprised that they knew about Japanese culture and language. For example, sushi and sake.*

³ Future research is needed to explore the ways to use the BBS for teaching language with the viewpoint of improving students' English language proficiency. This activity has motivated students learning of English, but has not proved that it improved students' appropriate use of the target language yet.

Finally, it should be noted that the students seem to have learned different points in each reflection period. In the first class period, students review their BBS activity and learn additional cultural matters other than linguistic items. In the second class period, on the other hand, students are able to read their BBS conversation more actively and in more personalized ways, by reconstructing their conversation as a diagram on the wall.

The followings are students' comments on the first reflective class period (translated from Japanese to English):

- 1) I felt easier to read the whole BBS
- 2) I was able to read the messages that I was not aware
- 3) I felt accomplished seeing my posting has become the vital part of the whole discourse.

The followings are students' comments on the second reflective class period (translated from Japanese to English):

- 1) It was fun to trace and create what I had done after on-line communication, on the wall.
- 2) I felt valuable in that I was able to reflect what I have done with taking care of other people's reactions toward me and vice versa.

Those comments show that students have recognized the same BBS communication from different points of view in each reflection period. Their two different strategies to grasp their conversation during each reflection activity were not what the current original BBS was able to facilitate. Students' work on the wall, especially on the second day, shows their personalized BBS interactions. The students were very excited to work for the BBS personalization, even though the interactions on BBS had been already conducted in public on-line.

IV. CONCLUSION

This experiment indicates that the need of developing our BBS further more, in that it should:

- 1) *facilitate users' reflective activity with more free style posting, not by being limited with threaded posting, and*
- 2) *let users view the whole sequence easier, to facilitate their learning of language and cultures.*

The following Fig. 8 is the model that this research group will be implementing at the next stage. The BBS attempts to feature items that students were able to learn both in on-line environment and in off-line environment through this experiment:

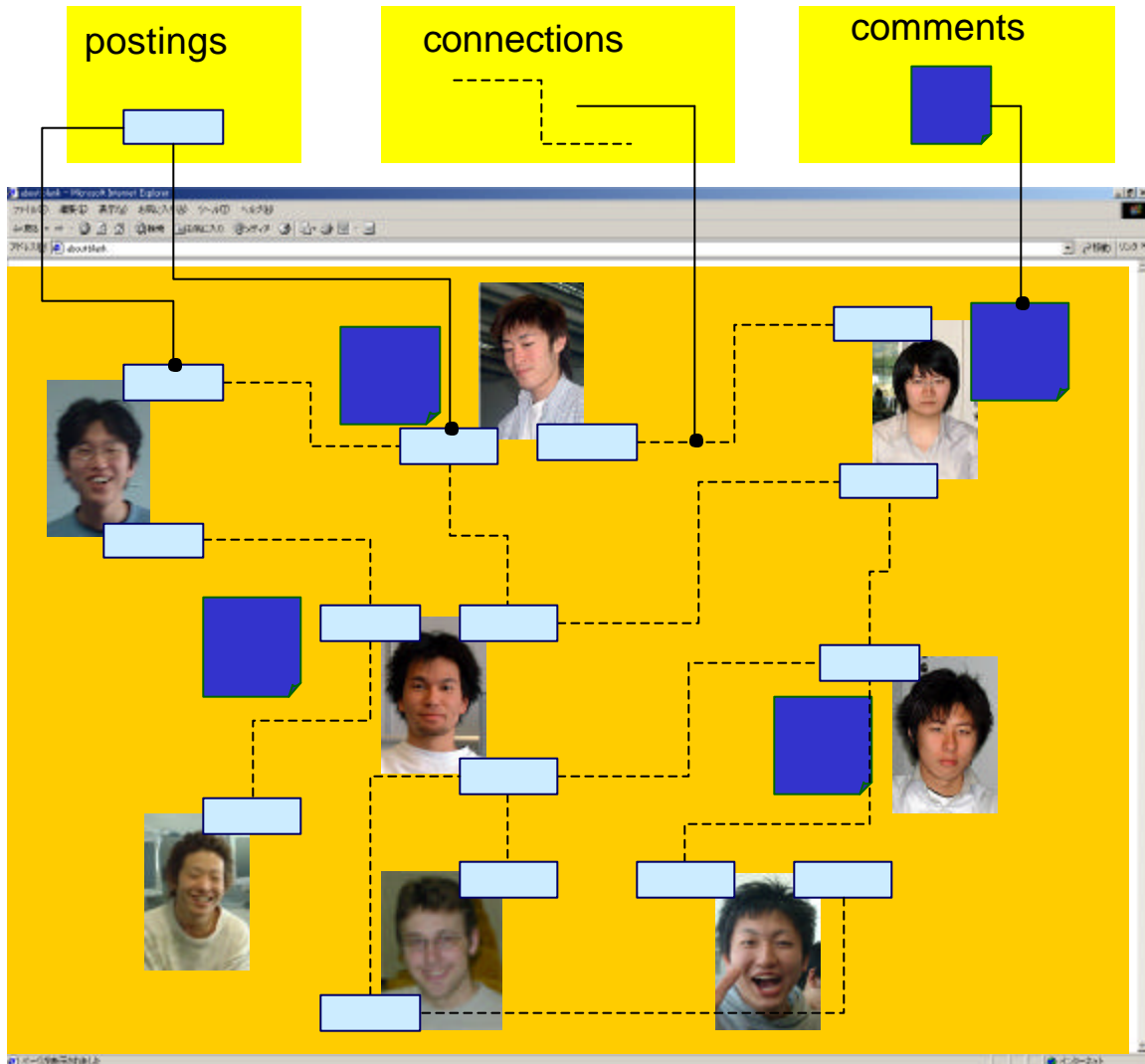


Fig.8. Model of BBS to Facilitate Students' Reflective Activities On-Line

The findings of this study indicate the validity of using the language in authentic settings with native speakers with online environment, as a learning space of foreign language and cultures. It also suggests that the BBS provides a promising field of study in language and culture education.

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