Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) and its possible effectiveness on learners' development of Intercultural Competence

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Abstract
The main purpose of this study is to measure possible effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) on the development of learners' Intercultural Competence (IC). Initiated by Waseda University in 1999, CCDL has offered collaborative joint cyber seminars among Asian universities. CCDL courses not only give students opportunity to use English to communicate with students in other countries, but also develop students' skills to learn how to cope with cultural differences, how to manage the conversation, and eventually to acquire social and emotional intelligence (Nakano, Murao, Yokota, Sumi, Ito, and Mcdermott, 2007: 191), all of which are important elements of IC. This study focuses on CCDL and its possible influence on IC from the view point of CCDL participants. A questionnaire with 25 items elicited from Byram's model of IC (Byram, 1997) was distributed to 68 Waseda University students who are enrolled in CCDL classes for the spring semester in 2011. The results showed that the students evaluated CCDL highly in terms of its possible effectiveness on the development of their IC. Meanwhile, the degree of their agreement differed depending on the items, showing relatively lower degree for items that require deeper understanding of one's interlocutors and their cultures.

Keywords
Cross-Cultural Distance Learning, Intercultural Competence, Intercultural communication

1. Introduction
1.1 Background of intercultural education in Japan
With the wave of globalisation, the need for understanding other cultures is increasing. Accordingly, the skills to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds have become one of the essential skills for people of any country to acquire. However, even in this globalising world, intercultural education has not successfully been conducted in English language education in Japan (Nagai, 2002: 5). Indeed, English continues to be one of the required subjects throughout the 6-year secondary education in Japan. Entrance exams both for upper secondary schools and for universities require English, no matter which directions students may go in the future. In addition, primary schools have just started to implement English language education for 5th and 6th grades, with the aim of cultivating Japanese pupils' communication skills at an earlier age. Therefore, there is no doubt that English is regarded as one of the most important subjects in Japan. However, outside the classrooms, foreign cultures and English have nothing to do with Japanese people's daily life and they have no problem to make a living without foreign cultures and English (ibid.: 12). Although the number of international students at Japanese universities is increasing, the present condition is not enough to expose Japanese students to other cultures. According to Japan Student Services Organisation, Waseda University, having 3,568 international students in 2010, is ranked at the top among all universities in Japan for the total number of international students. Nevertheless, most of Waseda University students spend time at university without interacting with any international students. These present conditions in Japan prevent Japanese students from becoming aware of the importance of intercultural understandings, and therefore, from developing skills they need to acquire in order to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. However, it is from such experiences of actual exposure to different cultures that students are most likely to develop those skills (Aoki, 2007: 63). The problem is that not all Japanese students can or are motivated enough to go abroad. It is here that the potential effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) becomes significant.

1.2 CCDL programmes at Waseda University
Waseda University has run CCDL since 1999. CCDL enables students at Waseda to interact with students in other Asian countries through *Live On,* a web-based conference system that can be accessed

from anywhere in the world. Through the actual interactions with other Asian students, participants are expected to be aware of cultures of their interlocutors as well as their own, finding differences and similarities between them. Meanwhile, their communication skills are also expected to improve through the close communication with other students who speak English that reflects the culture and the first language of their own.

CCDL offers technological support to help students who speak different mother tongues and different 'Englishes' understand each other. On the same screen where all participants' faces can be displayed though a web camera on each computer, there is a chat space (*TextBox*) where students can type in words whenever necessary. Likewise, there is another space, *Whiteboard*, where participants can draw pictures to make their conversation clearer.

This half-year CCDL course is divided into 3 phases; Preparation Classes, Joint Classes, and Post Joint Classes. In Preparation Classes, students research and discuss topics with other Waseda University students to deepen their knowledge before the actual interactions on *Live on*. Students also learn basic skills that will be required to communicate smoothly with people from different cultural backgrounds. Based on what they have learnt in the preparation phase, students now discuss the topics with other Asian students through *Live on*. With the maximum number of participants for each chat room set as 6, these Joint Classes enable each student to participate in the discussions actively. After conducting this Joint Class from 5 to 7 times, Waseda University students return to in-class discussions again. In this Post Joint Classes, students discuss what they have discussed and found in the Joint Classes as well as the skills they have actually used to communicate with other Asian students, making groups with those who were not in the same chat room during the Joint Classes. What they have discussed in this phase will be shared in the presentations each group will make in the final week.

In addition to these theme-based CCDL programmes, Waseda University offers non-theme-based CCDL programmes as well. The latter ones are designed to realise cross-cultural communication via video-conference system. Thus, students participate in discussions as a whole class, rather than being divided into small groups. Although the ways of students' participation in the latter ones are different from those in the former theme-based programmes, this study included non-theme-based CCDL classes as well, considering that the main purpose of the research is to measure possible effectiveness of CCDL programmes as a whole.

1.3 Definition of Intercultural Competence

In order to define students' intercultural understandings and skills to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, Byram's model of Intercultural Competence (IC) was adopted for this study. There are mainly two reasons. First, it is a model widely accepted in foreign language education, including guiding principles of Council of Europe, with Byram himself being an advisor to its committee on foreign language education (Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey, 2002). Secondly, the components of Byram's model are closely related to the 9 concepts of CCDL: 1) Facilitation skills, 2) High/low context communication skills, 3) Translation equivalence, 4) Principles of spoken interaction – Grice's Maxims and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, 5) Reaching agreement, 6) Risk orientation, 7) Emotional intelligence, 8) Social intelligence, and 9) Research skills (Nakano, 2008).

Byram's IC is defined as abilities to interact and communicate with people from a different culture using a foreign language (Byram, 1997: 70). IC requires students to acquire *attitudes*, *knowledge*, *skills*, and *critical cultural awareness* that are essential for intercultural communication. Details of each component are as follows;

1) *Attitudes*: Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own (ibid.: 50)
2) *Knowledge*: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction (ibid.: 51)
3) *Skills of interpreting and relating*: Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own (ibid.: 52)
4) *Skills of discovery and interaction*: Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constrains of real-time communication and interaction (ibid.: 52)
5) *Critical cultural awareness*: An ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own ad other cultures and countries (ibid.: 53)

Attitudes and *knowledge* are regarded as preconditions while the two *skills* are factors that influence the actual process of intercultural communication. Meanwhile, Byram argues that

educational settings can additionally promote the development of *critical cultural awareness* (ibid.: 33). An intercultural speaker possesses all the 5 components, making the most of them in intercultural communication.

2. Previous Studies

Some research on distance learning based on the Byram's model has been reported in the context of intercultural communication. Schuetze (2008) analysed if materials and a list of processing criteria for assessment led to the development of IC. Having analysed online messages between 14 Canadian and 14 German university students in 2004, and between 12 Canadian and 12 German students in 2005, the research reported that students who asked wh-questions, shared personal experiences, gave examples, and found materials that was not provided in the distance course were successful in developing their IC.

Nakano, Donnery, and Fukui (2011) assessed Japanese students' development of IC in two different situations: 1) Skype session between 24 Japanese and 10 Malaysian university students, and 2) Face-to-face session between 24 Japanese and 15 international students in Japan. This research analysed *attitudes* and *knowledge* from quantitative approach based on questionnaires, while adopting qualitative approach for *skills* and *critical cultural awareness* investigating 500-word essays written by the participants in the end. Through the research, it was pointed out that both sessions facilitated development of all components of IC, except *critical cultural awareness*, which turned out to be hard to evaluate. In addition, both sessions succeeded especially in raising interest in their interlocutors' cultures.

These examples suggest that distance learning can work effectively in the development of participants' level of IC. However, not enough research has been conducted on students' self-assessment of IC in the context of distance learning. As suggested by Nakano et al. (2011), some aspects of the components are hard to be evaluated solely from the view point of assessors. Therefore, this study focuses on students' perspectives, investigating to what extent students expect their IC to develop through CCDL programmes they are participating in.

3. Method
3.1 Participants and questionnaire
The participants in this research were a total of 68 Waseda University students enrolled in CCDL classes for the spring semester in 2011, 28 of whom were male and 40 were female. The average age of the participants was 20.5, which indicates that a majority of them were either in the 1st or in the 2nd year. 43 of the 68 students were from 7 theme-based classes while the other 25 students were from 2 non-theme-based classes. They were asked to fill in a questionnaire on the final week of Joint Classes, after they had finished 4 or 5 cyber sessions. 5 items were selected to assess each of the 5 components, which made the total number of the items on the questionnaire 25. Those items are basically elicited from definitions of each component by Byram (Byram, 1997: 49-54). Although slight modifications were added wherever necessary so as to make the items better fit and easier to grasp for the CCDL participants, they were treated with great care so as not to change the core meanings of Byram's definitions. The participants were asked to choose a number from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) that most closely describes the extent of their agreement on each item: see Appendix.

3.2 Background information on the participants
Preceding the main 25 questions, general questions on students were asked in order to grasp basic background information on the participants: English proficiency level, experience of learning English, experience of going abroad, and previous experience of distance learning.

CCDL classes are recommended for those students whose English proficiency level is higher than intermediate (TOEIC score 703, TOEFL iBT score 63). 58% of the participants had taken TOEIC, with their average score being 766. 19% had TOEFL iBT scores whose average was 85. Although there were 12 students who had not taken any English proficiency test before, it is safe to estimate that the overall English proficiency level of the participants was relatively high.

In terms of the ways they had learnt English, 91% of them had experiences of learning English other than English classes at school. 38% of them went to private tutoring schools before entering university, while 24% of them had been to English conversation schools mainly to practice speaking and listening English. In addition, 29% answered that they had been learning English by themselves, making use of English movies, radio programmes, books, and so forth. Thus, the participants' motivation turned out to be relatively high.

Of all the participants, 87% had been abroad in some way. 34% of the visits were made when they were between 17-19 years old, 24% between 14-16 years old, 20% under 10 years old, 16% over 20 years old, and 6% between 11-13 years old. Thus, 74% of the visits were realised after the age of 14. As for purpose of the visits, 60% were on sightseeing trip, 31% on study-abroad programmes,

and 9% due to their parents' business. In terms of the length of their stay, 45% answered they stayed for less than 1 week, 30% between 1-3 weeks, 12% between 1-3 months, 6% between 2-12 months, and only 7% of them stayed abroad over 1 year. Therefore, it can be pointed out that although 87% of the participants had certain experiences of going abroad, most of them visited on sightseeing trip, staying less than 1 week. In other words, although most of them had certain experiences of going abroad, their stays were on average not long enough for them to have enough exposure to other cultures.

Finally, in terms of their previous experience of distance learning, 91% of them had never experienced before taking the present CCDL classes. While 9% had experienced distance learning before, all of them did in another CCDL class at Waseda either in 2009 or in 2010.

Therefore, it can be summarised that although the average English proficiency level of the participants was relatively high, and positive attitudes to learning English were seen from how they had learnt English, most of them had not had much exposure to other cultures before taking the present CCDL classes. CCDL, therefore, was expected to offer them new opportunities to experience intercultural communication, which would lead to the development of their IC.

4. Results and Discussions
4.1 Attitudes
The results of the first 5 items, which are categorised as *attitudes,* are as follows;
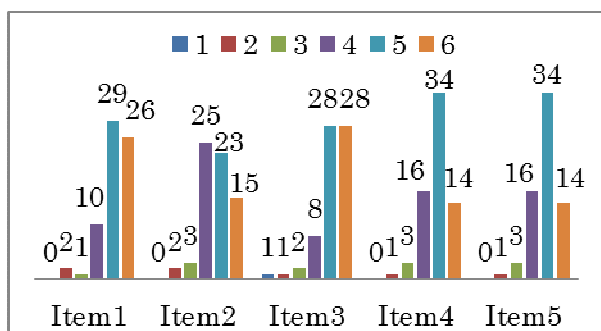

Figure 1: Attitudes

Of all the 5 components, *attitudes* scored the highest average with the smallest variance (Mean=4.96, SD=0.96, Mode=5). The percentage of the participants who disagree to the development of IC was very small (1 =0%, 2=2%, 3=3%). On the other hand, 44% of the participants marked 5, 29%, marked 6, and 22% marked 4. These results show that most of the participants expressed high degree of agreement on CCDL's role in developing their intercultural attitudes.

4.2 Knowledge
Compare to *attitudes, knowledge* shows lower level of and wider degree of agreement (Mean= 4.40, SD=1.11, Mode=4).
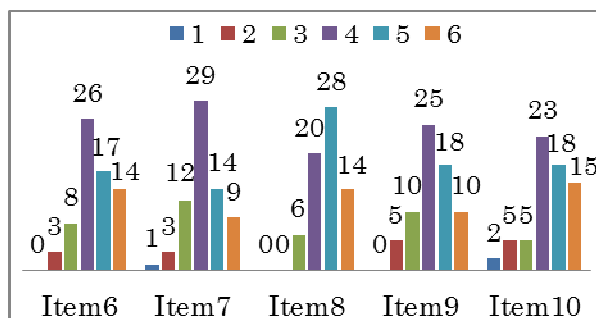

Figure 2: Knowledge

Although the percentage of disagreement is still small (1=1%, 2=2%, 3=12%), the percentage of 3 rose especially in the Item 7, 'Knowledge on one's own culture'. The agreement level of 4 occupied the highest ratio (36%), followed by 5(28%) and then 6 (18%). It can be argued that although a majority of the participants agree to the development of *knowledge*, the degree of their agreement is wider than that of *attitudes*, which indicates that people judge their own achievement of intercultural knowledge differently. In addition, the results suggest that the development of knowledge on one's own culture can be harder to recognise than that on one's interlocutor's culture.

4.3 Skills of interpreting and relating
Of all the 5 components, *skills of interpreting and relating* showed the lowest mean score with the largest range of agreement level (Mean=3.99, SD=1.13, Mode=4).
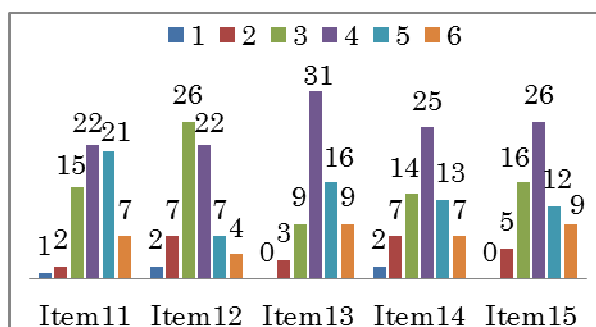

Figure 3: Skills of interpreting and relating

Although the mode stays 4, the percentage of disagreement to the development of this category turned out to be the highest of all the 5 components (1=1%, 2=7%, 3=24%). In particular, the level of agreement on Item 12 'Explain origins of perspectives peculiar to the other culture' and Item 11 'Identify ethnocentric perspectives' was lower. What the items in this component have in common

is that they require deeper understanding of cultures in the intercultural interaction, rather than simply receiving and sending cultural facts. It can be suggested, therefore, that since it may take longer time to develop the skills and the speed of the development can differ from person to person, students' assessment turned out to be lower with a wider range of assessment level.

4.4 Skills of discovery and interaction

The other skills, *skills of discovery and interaction*, on the other hand showed closer picture to the results of *attitudes* (Mean= 4.58, SD=0.98, Mode=5).
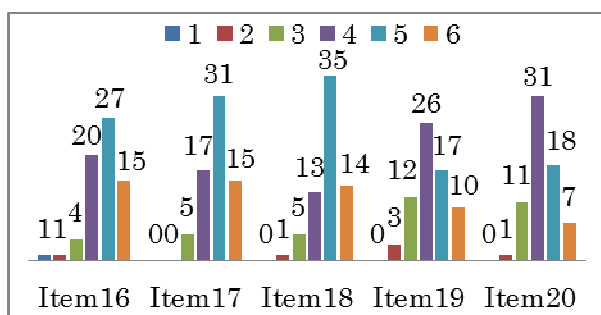

Figure 4: Skills of discovery and interaction

From the figure above, it is clear that the percentage of agreement (4=31%, 5=38%, 6=18%) is higher than that of disagreement (1=0%, 2=2%, 3=11%). If the figure is compared to the others, it can be placed between *attitudes* and *knowledge*. Indeed, just as Byram argues that *attitudes* and *knowledge* precondition while the *skills* influence the interaction, the results proved that those three are closely connected. For instance, 'Elicit from the interlocutor new concepts and values of the other culture (Item 20)' requires 'Willingness to discover another culture (Item 1)'. Even so, *skills* are more complicated and higher in level to develop, which can explain the lower level of agreement in this component compared to that in *attitudes*.

4.5 Critical cultural awareness

Finally, the figure below shows the results for *critical cultural awareness* (Mean=4.30, SD=0.99, Mode=4).
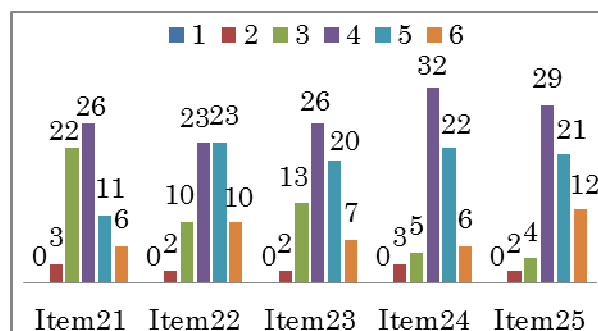

Figure 5: Critical cultural awareness

The total percentage of disagreement is 19% (1=0%, 2=3%, 3=16%), while that of agreement is 81% (4=40%, 5=29%, 6=12%). Simply comparing the ratios suggests that this component is second to the last in terms of the points given by the participants. However, the figure above shows that the last two items, Item 24 and Item 25, show higher level of agreement than the other three. In fact, Item 24 is closely related to skills of reaching agreement, and Item 25 to facilitation skills, both of which are a part of the main 9 concepts of CCDL. This result proves certain connection between CCDL and the development of IC. As argued by Byram, further supported by Nakano et al. (2011), self-analytical accounts of their interaction by learners themselves will prove the main evidence in this component (Byram, 1997: 103). Considering that *critical cultural awareness* is the 'educational' component of IC (ibid.:101), it is safe to estimate that CCDL shows positive sign in developing this component to the extent that learners can acknowledge the development by themselves.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated students' assessment of the extent to which their IC could be developed though CCDL. The results showed that most of the 25 items were assessed positively, nearly 80% of the participants being somewhat agree that CCDL could help them develop their IC to certain extent. Among the 5 components, *attitudes* demonstrated the highest degree of agreement with the smallest variance, while *skills of interpreting and relating* showed the lowest average points with the largest variance. As a whole, superficial exchanges of information scored higher, while items that require deeper understanding of each other scored lower. To validate the findings, further research will be required. However, the overall positive assessment by the participants clearly suggests that students highly expect CCDL to help them develop their IC. It is essential, therefore, to consider how to design and conduct CCDL in a way that can work most effectively in tandem with students' motivation as well as expectation so as to develop their IC.

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Appendix

Do you think CCDL can help you develop the following attitudes/ knowledge/ skills?

Please choose and mark a number from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) that most closely describes your opinion.

【Attitudes】

1. Willing to discover another culture
2. Willing to discover one's own culture
3. Be aware that people from different cultures have different values and perspectives
4. Willing to question subjectively what is taken for granted in one's own country
5. Ready to actively engage in intercultural communication and interaction

【Knowledge】

6. Knowledge on the interlocutor's culture (history, geography, conventions etc.)
7. Knowledge on one's own culture (history, geography, conventions etc.)
8. Recognise how one's own country is seen from the perspectives of the interlocutor's country
9. Knowledge on the types of cause and process of misunderstanding in the intercultural interaction
10. Grasp characteristics of English commanded by the interlocutor

【Skills of interpreting and relating】

11. Identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document or utterances sent by the interlocutor
12. Explain origins of perspectives peculiar to the other culture
13. Explain how perspectives of the interlocutor are different from one's own
14. Identify areas of misunderstanding and explain it from the pre-suppositions rooted in each culture
15. Mediate between conflicting interpretations in the intercultural interaction

【Skills of discovery and interaction】

16. Facilitate communication under the constrains of real-time interaction
17. Identify similarities between one's own and the interlocutor's cultures
18. Identify dissimilarities between one's own and the interlocutor's cultures
19. Discover new aspects of the other culture
20. Elicit from the interlocutor new concepts and values of the other culture

【Critical cultural awareness】

21. Critically evaluate the information sent by the interlocutor
22. Critically evaluate what is taken for granted in one's own culture
23. Critically evaluate what is taken for granted in the interlocutor's culture
24. Negotiate a degree of acceptance and reach to agreement in the intercultural interaction
25. Judge the interaction subjectively and mediate the intercultural exchanges