This is the accepted version of a paper published in *LMS Lingua*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Teaching Intercultural Communication in Foreign Language Education through Video Conferencing.
*LMS Lingua*, (1): 20-24

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:du-13270
Teaching Intercultural Communication in Foreign Language Education through Video Conferencing

Wei Hing Rosenkivst
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Hong Kong
WeiHing.R@connect.polyu.hk

1. Introduction
Since 1980s, Western linguists and specialists on second language acquisition have emphasized the importance of enhancing students' intercultural communication competence in foreign language education. At the same time, the demand for intercultural communicative competence increased along with the advances of communication technology with its increasingly global reach and the process of globalization itself. In the field of distance language education, these changes have resulted in a shift of focus from the production and distribution of learning materials towards communication and learning as a social process, facilitated by various internet-based platforms. The current focus on learners interacting and communicating synchronously through videoconferencing is known as the fourth generation of distance language education.

Despite the fact that teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) faces the same or even greater challenges as teaching other languages, the intercultural communication perspective is still quite a new trend in CFL and its implementation and evaluation are still under development. Moreover, the advocates of the new trends in CFL have so far focused almost exclusively on classroom-based courses, neglecting the distance mode of CFL and leaving it as an open field for others to explore.

In this under-researched context, Dalarna University (Sweden), where I currently work, started to provide web-based courses of 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. The textbooks used in both settings basically followed the functional nationalism approach. However, in order to catch up with the main trend of foreign-language education, we felt a need to implement the cross-cultural dimension into the distance courses as well. Therefore in 2010, a pilot study has been carried out to explore opportunities and challenges for implementing a cross-cultural perspective into existing courses and evaluating the effectiveness of this implementation based on the feedback of the students and on the experience of the teacher/researcher.

2. Video Conferencing in Distance Foreign Language Education
Due to the increased demand for developing intercultural competence in foreign language education, scholars have been exploring different aspects of evaluating intercultural competence progress among distance language learners and the extent to which materials and pedagogy in distance courses can facilitate this process. The development of the fourth generation of ICT technology of foreign language education, such as the introduction of video conferencing tools (Adobe Connect, Maretech, NetMeeting, etc.) as the media of language teaching and learning, creates a better learning environment for foreign language education in which the implementation of intercultural communication theories has become possible in distance language courses. Several European studies (O’Dowd, 2000, 2005, 2007; O’Dowd and Waire, 2009) were conducted to integrate video-conferencing technology into some task-based cross-cultural exchange projects for learners of the Spanish and English languages. These studies reveal positive aspects of using this medium, such as enabling the learners to interact with native speakers “face to face” synchronously, allowing them to share multiple sources of information simultaneously in the virtual spaces and enhancing their cultural awareness of their own culture as well as of the target one. Yet the studies also point out the limitations of using this medium and suggest using “telecollaborative models” – a combination of communication technologies, such as email, web-based message boards and video-conferencing – for online intercultural exchange between the learners and their native target language partners.
However, the scope of published research about teaching CFL in distance mode is extremely limited. In 2004, an empirical study of teaching CFL described how eight distance language learners of Chinese make use of the video conferencing tool NetMeeting when learning this foreign language and illustrated their perceptions in this new learning environment (Wang, 2004 a, b). According to the author, 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.

3. Action Research in CFL – A Case Study in Sweden

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, 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 that videoconferencing indeed can be a successful tool in promoting students’ intercultural communication competence as the previously mentioned empirical study suggested.

As suggested by McKernan (1996: 1), an action research has been carried out in order to improve the curriculum and to provide new inputs both for analysis and improvement of existing and possible future ways of teaching CFL in the distance mode.

3.1 Research Setting

The pilot study was implemented in spring 2011, being the first attempt to implement the intercultural communication approach into a distance Chinese language course for the beginners at Dalarna University (“Chinese 1”).

An action research is usually a cyclical process which involves several procedures, such as investigating the problems, planning the changes, implementing the modified syllabus, evaluation, etc. To follow the action plan, at first, the current course syllabus, textbook and the teaching materials have all been reviewed. Special attention was focused on their approach and methodology from the perspective of intercultural communication. The materials used in the textbook were also reviewed in order to see how they reflect 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 have been presented with a wide range of interactive activities. However, since most of the students in the courses were English-speaking Swedes living in Sweden, they had limited chances to practice the Chinese language outside their virtual classroom. Therefore, for each of the Swedish students, an interview with a Chinese student studying at the Dalarna University has been arranged. 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 a one-to-one setting in the virtual classroom.

The activity was first carried out on a volunteer basis outside of the students’ regular class schedule. However, due to the extremely low participation, it was later implemented 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 with using Chinese during the interviews and also with the specific internet-based communication technology that has been used as a platform for the activity.
Another questionnaire has been prepared for the Chinese students to find out their views on the effectiveness of this form of teaching the Chinese language and their assessments of the Swedish students’ communication skills, again with the focus on intercultural communication.

3.2 Data Collection
Despite some difficulties with receiving back the questionnaires, the data that has been collected provide a solid foundation for further exploration. As mentioned, since the majority of students decided not to participate in the interviews outside the classroom, it was necessary to make this activity 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 were 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.

3.3 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 become the centre of attention. Beginners need to use basic phrases and sentence patterns which can be easily understood. The native Chinese speakers in turn do not have high expectations for their Swedish interview partners and are 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 four generations. Only after the Swedish student told the Chinese student that his wife was older than him, did the Chinese student finally understand the true meaning. Some Chinese students also noted that some culturally-related concepts were not properly understood by the Swedish students, as shown by their choices of vocabulary. This indicates that some of the Chinese students were able 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.
4. Conclusions
In order to enhance the intercultural communication skills of the Swedish students, a relatively realistic scenario of an interview with a Chinese student has been added to the regular schedule of the internet-based CFL class. While the declared goal of this activity was to test the learned skills in a “real situation” with a native speaker, the researcher also wanted to evaluate the sensitivity of the students towards 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 point of view of the native speakers.

The internet-based nature of the course had also 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, outside of the university campus.

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.

Reference