DISTANCE LEARNING OF THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE:

AN EMPIRICAL REPORT

Yukie Aida, Alex Aguila and Nicholas Himmel, University of Texas at Austin

Abstract: This paper reports a case of distance learning involving the Japanese language education.   Using the campus-wide computer system of a large university in the U.S., the U. S. Navy's high-speed wireless Internet, two personal laptop computers, and video cameras, one American student could participate in the classroom activities done in the U.S. real time from U.S. Fleet Activities Naval Base in Sasebo, Japan.
Keywords: distance learning, Japanese language learning

INTRODUCTION

The National Center for Educational Statistics (Waits, Lewis, and Greene, 2003) reported that credit-granting distance education courses at either the undergraduate or graduate level were offered by 55 percent of all two-year and four-year institutions.   A large number of colleges and universities are involved in distance education.   American Association of University Professors (2007) defines distance education or distance learning as instruction where the teacher and the student are separated geographically so that face-to-face communication is absent; communication is accomplished instead by one or more technological media.   This exact circumstance occurred during the summer session of 2006 when the first author of this paper taught an intensive Japanese course at the University of Texas at Austin.

One of the students (Mr. Aguila, the second author of this paper) enrolled in JPN507 (First-Year Japanese II) had to miss one entire week of instruction (3 hours a day and 5 days a week = the total of 15 hours) due to the U.S. Navy's training requirement. Mr. Aguila had to leave the country in order to fulfill his annual training requirement at U.S. Fleet Activities Naval Base in Sasebo, Japan.   In stead of withdrawing from the course, he and his classmate (Mr. Himmel, the third author of this paper) took an initiative in searching for any technological solutions.   In the end, they successfully set up their personal computers utilizing the University's information technology services so that Mr. Aguila could have easy access to the classroom instruction and take quizzes real time in Sasebo, Japan.   Below we will provide the information on what hardware and

software were necessary and describe the step-by-step procedure of building the connection between the classroom in the U.S. and the student in Japan.

HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE REQUIREMENTS

The following hardware and software were necessary to make this distance learning possible.

1) Laptop computers: Mr. Aguila had an Apple MacBook Pro with a built-in iSight video camera.   It had a memory size of 2.0 GB DDR2 SDRAM, running at 667Mhz. Mr. Himmel had a 1.67GHz PowerPC G4 PowerBook with 1GB of RAM with an Apple iSight video camera connected to the laptop.

2) Videoconferencing software: Mr. Aguila and Mr. Himmel both installed SightSpeed and set up free accounts with the SightSpeed service.   SightSpeed is essentially a replacement for a Mac OS X's built-in iChat, and has all the functions that iChat has. SightSpeed works with lower bandwidth and higher latency than iChat does, which makes SightSpeed more reliable than iChat when used for videoconferencing between computers that are separated by a significantly large physical distance.

3) Internet connections: Mr. Aguila used the U.S. Navy's high speed wireless Internet access provided by J-Spot while Mr. Himmel used the University's high-speed Tier-1 wireless connection (802.11b)

PROCEDURES TO BUILD THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE U. S. AND JAPAN

Mr. Aguila and Mr. Himmel agreed ahead of time to meet each other on line before class began in order to setup the connection.   Mr. Himmel used iChat to connect to the AOL Instant Messaging network where Mr. Aguila was waiting for him. Through iChat, both coordinated with each other to set up a connection through SightSpeed which would allow them to transmit audio and video information.   To set up the connection, both started the SightSpeed application, and one of them made a "call" to the other through the application.   SightSpeed has its own presence network that keeps track of logged-in users allowing them to refer to each other using their e-mail addresses.   This made it very easy for Mr. Aguila and Mr. Himmel to find each other.

With the connection set up, Mr. Aguila was able to see and hear the instructor and the class and vice versa.   The audio quality was very good.   When the students were

asked to practice a dialog, Mr. Aguila and Mr. Himmel engaged the practice as if they were in the same classroom.   When Mr. Aguila was called on for a question by the instructor, he had no problem understanding the question and could answer the question. Video quality was good enough to see facial expressions and slow to moderately fast motion.   Mr. Aguila completed an oral exam (telling a personal narrative) via videoconference.

Since there exists a big time difference between the U. S. and Japan, Mr. Aguila were attending class from 12am to 3am in Japan while his classmates were attending class from 10am to 1pm in the U. S.   In order to turn in his homework on time in U. S. time, Mr. Aguila completed the assignment, scanned it into an Adobe PDF document, and e-mailed it to the instructor by 11:30pm (9:30am Texas time).   Then, he proceeded to get ready to attend class through the audio-video connection.   As for quizzes, although it was not really clear to transmit information displayed on the overhead projector very well, Mr. Aguila was able to take a quiz (vocabulary or grammar) displayed on the screen, scan the answer sheet into an Adobe PDF document and email it back to the instructor without a long delay.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

The network bandwidth available to students on the wireless network at the University of Texas at Austin was not fast enough to allow us to send the highest quality video signal.   Also, the University limits the amount of data students are allowed to transmit and receive each week.   The University provides two classes of wireless Internet service: Class I and Class II, with Class I being high-bandwidth and Class II being low-bandwidth.   After a user reached 500MB of bandwidth usage in a single week, the University automatically downgrades service from Class I to Class II, which severely degraded the quality of the videoconference between Mr. Aguila in Japan and the class in Texas.   To rectify these problems, Mr. Himmel purchased additional bandwidth from UT's Information Technology Services.   The problem immediately disappeared and the videoconference resumed, and Mr. Aguila was once again able to attend class.

FINAL COMMENTS

Distance learning cases with regard to Japanese have been reported in various contexts, e.g., the Televised Japanese Language Program (Kataoka, 1987), language classes at a high school (Yi and Majima, 1993), and a summer program for children (Brooks and Fernandez, 2001).   In contrast to those above, this paper described a very special case of distance learning.   The setup was created to accommodate special needs of one student who refused to give up his opportunity to learn Japanese and to complete the course.   The student, Mr. Aguila, and his classmate, Mr. Himmel were very willing to extend their effort to explore technological possibilities to make this distance learning of the Japanese language possible.   The instructor was impressed by their dedication to learn and their skills in computer and information technologies.   We hope that this report can serve as a resource for those who need special accommodations and educational opportunities, whether their field of study is the Japanese language or not. Under a certain circumstances, this type of distance education could provide a viable alternative method of learning.

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