Using Video-conferencing to Change Japanese High School Students' Perceptions of China

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Background

According to a report published by the Pew Research Center (2013), Japanese attitudes toward China are the worst among all the countries surveyed. While China is viewed favorably by 19 out of 38 countries, only five percent of the 700 Japanese respondents had a favorable attitude towards China. A similar trend is reported by the Japanese Cabinet Office (2015), whose statistics show that only 14.8% of Japanese view China positively, demonstrating that historical antipathy toward China is a phenomenon in Japan.

The negative attitudes of the Japanese towards China reflect the political and security tensions that exist between the two countries (Pew Research Center, 2013). The animosity between China and Japan is the highest since 1972, when the two countries normalized their relationship (Wang, 2013). Since the current conflict between China and Japan is caused by the governments' failures to manage their bilateral relationship (Wan, 2013), both governments must work together to foster a more positive bilateral relationship. Unfortunately, Smith (2015) laments that active diplomacy between China and Japan has not positively influenced Japanese perceptions of China (p. 56). Fukuda (2015) warns that if the current Japanese negative perceptions towards China fail to be amended, anti-Chinese sentiments may continue to grow and may risk making leaders' restoration efforts less effective.

However, it is possible to address people's negative attitudes towards others through education. In 1999, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution titled "Declaration on a Culture of Peace," in which Article 4 states that "education at all levels is one of the principal means to build a culture of peace." The resolution cites the Preamble of the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, which declares that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."[1] Twenty-first century educators are responsible for fostering positive attitude toward others.

The literature that exists on prejudice reduction provides a useful theoretical framework that can help us understand how a culture of peace may be cultivated through education. Social psychology research on improving interracial relations has focused on contact theory credited mainly to the work of Allport (1979). The contact theory states that "prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goal" (p. 281). The effectiveness of contact on prejudice reduction has been generally supported by social psychological research (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Therefore, education that promotes contact between different groups will help to cultivate a culture of peace.

One traditional method of promoting contact is study abroad. The study abroad movement, which dates back to the 1950s in the United States, emerged from the rationale that increased international exchanges would "help people around the world readjust the distorted images of one another" (Rhinesmith, 1985, p. 12). Indeed, study abroad programs have become one of the most popular means of enhancing student perspectives of other cultures (Stearns, 2009, p. 65).

However, study abroad does not always bring positive change regarding the perception of others. For instance, contact between cultures does not always facilitate mutual understanding. Finchilescu (2010) observed that there was a high degree of self-segregation among students; different racial groups tended to avoid each other. In some unfortunate cases, there were reports of students who ended up hating their host countries. Dan (2003, p. 308) reports that Chinese students developed anti-Japanese sentiments after their study abroad experience in Japan.

Another issue of study abroad is its cost. Naffziger, Bott, and Mueller (2008) investigated factors influencing study abroad decisions and identified financial burden an important one. Even though many students and faculty are aware of the benefits of study abroad, only a few percent of students can actually study abroad. In Japan, approximately 55,350 Japanese students studying abroad in 2013, but it is only 2 percent of the number of college students (MEXT, 2016).

Given the lack of proven effectiveness of study abroad experiences on shifts in cultural perceptions as well as the financial costs involved in such programs, an alternative program, namely, video-conferencing, is proposed in this study. Drawing on the best practices of video-conferencing and attitude-change programs, the author created a video-conferencing program intended to change the perception of Japanese high school students toward China. A video-conferencing educational intervention model will be widely applicable because the technology enables participants living far away from each other to interact in a virtual space. The cost and risk of video-conferencing is far less than those entailed in the programs that are based on face-to-face interactions.

The purpose of this study is to explore how video-conferencing can promote a peaceful relationship among people who have negative feelings toward each other. This study first describes the framework that was used to design the educational program, its technology,

and the process used to implement it. Second, the survey data of the Japanese high school students' perceptions toward China before and after the educational program are used to discuss the effects of this educational program. Lastly, this study examines the use of video-conferencing in education for the promotion of a culture of peace.

Method
Framework of Educational Program

In support of this program's framework, this author relied on the cross-cultural course called "Global Understanding" (GU), a virtual course supported by technology which was developed by East Carolina University. GU provides an opportunity for students from different countries to interact and learn from each other (Chia, Poe & Young, 2011).

The partner universities bought H.323 video-conferencing systems to support their students' synchronous conversations. The first pilot of GU was conducted in 2003 by East Carolina University, US. Chia, Poe, & Wuensch (2009) reported that after taking the GU course, the students' comfort and willingness to interact with those from a different culture increased and xenophobic attitudes decreased. Since the success of the GU course has been reported, the number of partners implementing GU has increased to more than 40 institutions from 26 countries across the world. The University of Shimane joined the GU network in January, 2010.

The creators of the GU course invented a novel method aimed at reconciling the differences in the partner institutions' academic calendars. Due to the fact that universities begin at different times of the year, the degree of bilateral collaboration between different countries can be difficult to achieve. For example, the spring semester in Japan lasts between April and July, while it extends from January to May in the United States. These differences limit bilateral collaboration between Japan and the United States because there is only one month in which there is an overlapping schedule. East Carolina University, on the other hand, created a system in which each partner could be linked with other three partners throughout the semester in order to remedy the calendar differences. For example, during the first 4 to 5 video-conferencing links Japan might be paired with the United States. After the links with US, Japan might be paired with China for 4 to 5 links, which would be followed by the third 4 to 5 links with Russia. All these countries have different academic calendars. In this way, the GU course made the possibility of hosting multiple video-conferencing discussions throughout the academic year feasible.

The duration of a meeting lasts approximately 70 minutes depending on the time that each institution has available. In order to allow all the students to interact with their partners, the class, which is usually comprised of 16 students, is divided into two groups. Each day half of the class starts the video-conferencing session by sitting in front of the camera, while the other half uses computers to exchange text messages. After 30 minutes, the groups switch communication technologies. In this way, everyone is able to "meet" their partners and exchange ideas, via both video and text chat.

The students are given discussion topics and sample discussion questions that facilitate their cultural understanding. The depth of the topics move from familiar and easy-to-answer topics such as "college life" and "family" to more cognitively demanding topics, such as "religion," "prejudice," and "stereotypes." The question list is given to the students, but they are free to ask any questions. Generally, students use the questions from the list, and they repeat the same questions when they meet the next country's partners. In this way, the students can compare different answers and gain cultural relativity.

Educational Program for Japanese High School Students

The author designed a new educational program that is based on the framework of the above-mentioned GU course that suits the needs of Japanese high schools. While GU is a credit-bearing course comprised of more than 15 virtual meetings that span one semester, this educational program is a singular meeting that can be completed in 40 minutes. The topic of the cross-cultural discussion, "high-school life in China and Japan," was chosen because high school students can easily relate to this topic.

Skype was used as the video-conferencing technology for this program. Skype is a free video-conferencing software that enables Skype users to see and talk to each other synchronously. The author prepared a computer, camera, microphone, speakers, projector, and an Internet router for Skype video-conferencing. Connection tests were conducted twice before the actual video-conferencing took place between Chinese and Japanese students.

Participants

The participants of this program were 28 Japanese high school students from a public senior high school in the western part of Japan.[2] People in the area seldom meet any foreigners other than native English teachers. The participants were in the 15–16 year old age range and were in their first year of senior high school. They volunteered to join this cross-cultural exchange with Chinese students in English via video-conferencing. The cross-cultural video-conferencing program was offered twice on October 16, 2013, and there were 14 participants in each session.

The Chinese counterparts are four graduate students studying at the University of Shimane. They were all graduates of Chinese high schools and universities, and they are fluent in both Japanese and English.

Preparation with the Japanese students

The author gave the Japanese students who signed up for the videoconference with Chinese students an assignment one week before the video-conferencing session. The assignment was intended to help students get ready for discussions in English with Chinese students about high school life. Since it is difficult for most Japanese students to find the right English words without thinking in advance, the following questions were given to help them prepare for the upcoming discussion to be held in English. The author did not collect

the assignments from the students because she was familiar with high school life in Japan.

1. Can anyone go to high school? How do people get into high school?
2. How much time is spent studying? What is a typical high school day like?
3. How much time is spent socializing? What types of things do you do when you are not studying?
4. Why do people want to go to high school?
5. How much does it cost to go to high school? How is it paid for?
6. In which extra-curricular activities do you participate?
7. Do you have a uniform? What do you think of the uniform?
8. What is the most important event in your high school? Why?
9. What do you want to do after graduating from high school? Why?

Preparation with the Chinese students

The author also gave the Chinese students the same preparation assignment one week before the video-conference. The assignment was intended to help the Chinese students prepare for their discussion in English with Japanese students on high school life. They filled out the questions and turned them in to the author. The author interviewed each student to get a better understanding of high school life in China. It was important for the author to gain knowledge about high school life in China so that she could moderate discussion between the Chinese and Japanese students.

Language used for Interaction

English is considered to be the best language to use to facilitate discussions between Chinese and Japanese, and it is the most popular foreign language taught in both Chinese and Japanese high schools (Kingsley & Graddol, 2012; Hasegawa, 2013). Japanese students study English for six years in junior and senior high school. Chinese students study English for nine years: from Grade 3 to their senior year of high school.

Given that many Chinese students study Japanese in Chinese schools and have high oral fluency in the language, it might be possible to use Japanese as the medium of exchange between Japanese and Chinese students (Minamoto, 2010). However, an interactive situation in which one side uses a native language and the other side uses a foreign language may cultivate an environment in which native speakers develop a sense of superiority due to their advanced language proficiency. Thus, if both groups use a foreign language as a means of communication, this will increase the likelihood that both groups will be of equal status, which is an important factor in prejudice reduction, as proposed by Allport (1979, p. 281). English, an international language and the primary foreign language used in both countries, will probably serve as the best medium of communication between Japanese and Chinese students.

Technology used for interaction

Japanese participants were able to clearly view the screen during their video-conferencing session. The Japanese students were able to see the faces and the top portion of the Chinese students' bodies because only four of them were visible on the screen. The moderately close-up view of the Chinese students effectively created comfortable distance for people meeting for the first time.

Supporting staff

In order to conduct a video-conferencing meeting, it is necessary to have technical staff who support it. Three technical staff supported the author: one who was responsible for the audio equipment and two technical staff who were responsible for the Internet connection. The audio technical staff set up the equipment in the high school classroom and adjusted the lighting and operated the video camera. One technical assistant constantly monitored the Internet connection and communicated using Skype's chat function with another technical staff member in the classroom of the Chinese students.

Pre-exchange Survey

The educational program took place on October 16, 2013. At the beginning of each session, the author gave an overview of the video-conferencing experience and distributed the pre-exchange survey. There were three questions that assessed their level of knowledge about China, their current state of emotions, and their perceptions of China.

Skype Video-conferencing

The first group of 14 Japanese students met the four Chinese students via Skype from 13:30 to 14:10, and the second group of 14 Japanese students met the same four Chinese students via Skype from 14:45 to 15:25. The length of the video-conferencing was 40 minutes each. The Japanese students sat in semi-circles in front of the camera and the screen. They saw the four Chinese students on the screen.

The author moderated the discussion. She held a microphone, which was connected to the computer. Each of the participants held a sign on which their first name was written and then they introduced themselves. Due to the fact that it was difficult for the Japanese students to pronounce the Chinese name, the Chinese students used their English nicknames instead of their Chinese names. Japanese students wrote their original names on their signs.

The author started the Skype discussion with an initial greeting and had the Chinese students introduce themselves first. Next, each of the Japanese students introduced themselves. Every time a Japanese student said, "Hi. My name is⋯. Nice to meet you," the Chinese students repeated their names and said "Hi" and smiled and waved their hands. The author instructed the Chinese students to repeat the names and smile at the Japanese students in the hope of giving them a good first impression.

The author first asked the Chinese students, "Can anyone go to high school? How do

people get into high school? How difficult is it?" The Chinese students answered that students whose academic performances were good could go to senior high school, which was a college examination preparation school, and that students who did not have high scores should go to vocational school. Then the author asked the same question to the Japanese students. One boy raised his hand and answered that Japanese junior high school students also needed to take an entrance examination to enter high school.

The next question asked about how much time students spent studying. The Chinese students answered that they stayed at high school from 7:00 AM to 9:00 PM, and that they studied when they got home until midnight. Furthermore, they said that the Chinese high school was a preparatory school for the national college entrance examination. The Japanese students reacted to the Chinese students' responses with surprise. The author asked the Japanese students how many students studied more than one hour at home, and a few students raised their hands. The author asked how many students studied more than 30 minutes at home, and a few hands were raised. Then the author asked how many students studied zero hours at home. Most hands were raised and were accompanied by giggles.

The next question concerned what the students did when they were not studying. The Chinese students replied that they chatted with classmates because they stayed at school all day, and they also said they went shopping with friends on weekends. The Japanese students said that they had club activities after school. The author passed the microphone and everyone shared what club they belonged to. Some students responded that they were members of baseball, tennis, and basketball, teams. Others participated in the brass band, archery, art, etc. Chinese students reacted to their responses with expressions such as "wow" and "nice."

After replying to these three questions, it was time to say good-bye.

Figure 1. Skype Video-conferencing

Post-exchange Survey

After saying good-bye, the Japanese students were asked to answer the post-exchange survey and report on their state of emotions and perceptions about China. They also responded to the question about whether or not they would like to do this type of meeting again.

Results

Students' Knowledge about China

The students' knowledge levels about China were surveyed by asking them how much they know about Chinese history and culture, and the results are shown in Figure 2. Although most of the Japanese students learn Chinese history and geography, they expressed a lack of confidence in their knowledge about China.
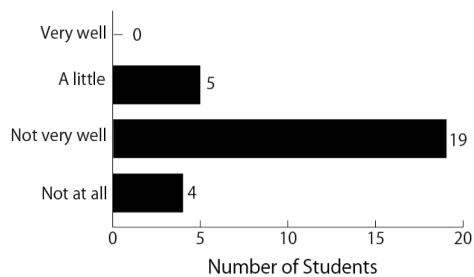
Figure 2. Depth of Knowledge about China

Emotions of High School Students Before Video-conferencing

The emotions of the Japanese high school students prior to the video-conferencing exchange were surveyed. In response to the question: "What are you feeling now?" the students expressed multiple emotions; therefore, the total number in Figure 3 exceeds the number of participants. Their answers were coded into the following four emotions: "surprised," "uncertain," "nervous," "curious & excited."
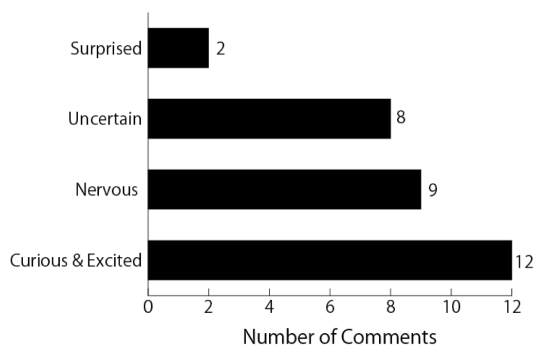
Figure 3. Emotions before Interaction

Two of the students expressed that they were surprised to hear that they were going to meet overseas students via a video-conferencing session, which surprised the author because she thought they knew about it. Most of the students expressed emotions such as "uncertain," or "nervous." Their apprehension was mostly due to their lack of confidence in being able to communicate in English, but some of them were afraid of speaking to the Chinese students. Many students expressed mixed emotions. For instance, one student reported that she was "uncertain if I could communicate in English but I am excited with

this opportunity." Twelve students were curious about this opportunity and enthusiastic about speaking English with foreigners.

The seemingly negative emotions reported by students such as "uncertain" or "nervous" should not be thought of as necessarily negative. None of the students expressed negative emotions such as "angry" or "disgusted." Contrary to the negative attitudes of Japanese toward China as was reported by the Pew Research Center (2013) and the Japanese Cabinet Office statistics (2015), the high school students did not report that they felt any animosity toward China. They were more concerned about whether or not they could make themselves understood in English rather than how the Chinese perceived them. The students felt a little bit uneasy about something that might happen in a new type of experience, but overall they were enthusiastic about meeting Chinese students.

Emotions of High School Students After Video-conferencing

The emotions of the Japanese high school students following the video-conferencing exchange were surveyed. In response to the question: "What are you feeling now?", the students expressed multiple emotions, which explains why the total numbers in Figure 4 exceed the number of the participants. Their answers were categorized under five emotions: "happy," "motivated to study," "surprised," "embarrassed," and "admiring Chinese."
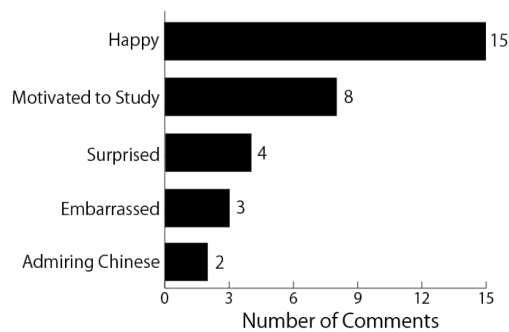

Figure 4. Emotions After Interaction

Further, 15 students expressed that they felt happy, grateful, or great because they had a good time. The students felt motivated to study English and continue to talk to the Chinese students. They were very surprised about Chinese high school life, especially the fact that Chinese students remained at school and studied for long periods of time in order to get into good universities. They were also surprised at how well the Chinese students spoke English. On the other hand, some Japanese students expressed that they were embarrassed by their inability to speak English. Two comments were written in the surveys: one person wrote that they admired the Chinese students because they were intelligent, and another wrote that the Chinese were wonderful people.

Perceptions of China before Video-conferencing

The perception of China was surveyed prior to the video-conferencing exchange. They answered to the question: "When you think of China what words come up to your mind?" They answered in words and phrases. Similar ideas were grouped and represented in Figure 5. The values show the number of comments.
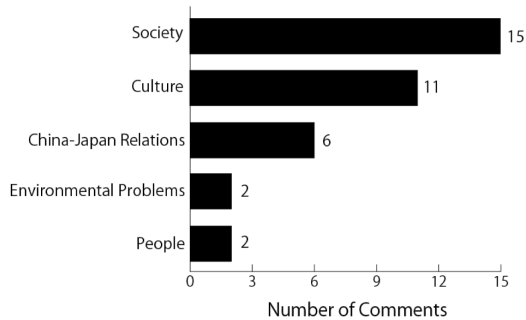

Figure 5. Perception of China Before Interaction

For Japanese students, the perception of China is related to how Chinese society is different from Japanese society, with regards to China's one-child policy, the fact that it is a communist country, has a big population, and is a big country in terms of land size. Also, the Japanese students mentioned certain Chinese cultural aspects such as its cuisine and its pandas. Six students reported that Japan has political issues with China, such as territorial issues. Two students wrote that China has environmental problems, such as air pollution. These perceptions about China are similar to what is reported in the Japanese mass media. Two students wrote that Chinese people were angry and proud. This perception was likely to be the result of mass-media coverage of anti-Japanese demonstrations in China. It can be concluded that Japanese perceptions of China prior to the video-conference sessions were factual and distant, as they based on inadequate or biased information provided by textbooks and the mass media.

Perceptions of China after Video-conferencing

The perception of China was surveyed after the video-conferencing exchange. Students answered the following question: "After the meeting, what words come to your mind about China?" The students provided written responses to this question. Similar ideas were placed into categories and are represented in Figure 6. The numbers correspond to the number of comments.

Further, 12 students reported that Chinese society was very academically competitive. They learned that Chinese high school students studied hard, long hours at school. Additionally, the Japanese students reported that they were in awe of Chinese people who endured such a rigorous, academically competitive school experience. As to the personalities of Chinese people, 19 of them mentioned positive characteristics, reporting they were

friendly, nice, gentle, smart, funny, wonderful, cheerful, and fantastic. One of them wrote that the Chinese were interested in Japan. It can be concluded that after experiencing direct personal encounters with the Chinese, the Japanese perceptions of China became more affectionate and positive.
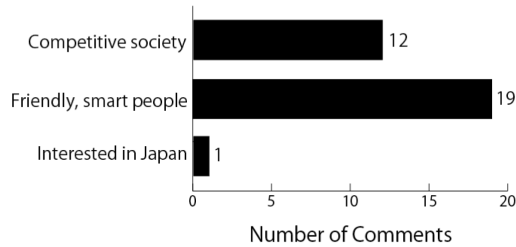
Figure 6. Percpetion of China After Interaction

Willingness to Meet Chinese Again

The willingness of the students to meet Chinese people again was surveyed after the video-conferencing exchange. In response to the following question: "Would you like to meet Chinese again?", they answered yes or no, which is expressed in Figure 7.
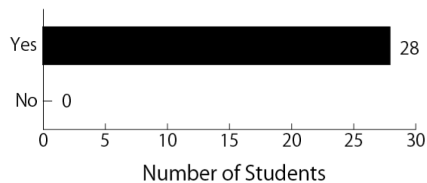
Figure 7. Willingness to Meet Chinese Again

Overwhelmingly, they were all willing to meet Chinese people again.

Discussion

The findings of this study are very similar to those reported by Ogawa and Ishimori (2007), who reported that a face-to-face group discussion between Chinese and Japanese high school students improved the Japanese high school students' perceptions of China. Furthermore, it was found that the Japanese students' feelings about meeting the Chinese students prior to the video conference were somewhat negative. After the video-conference session, however, they felt more positive toward meeting them. Also, the perceptions of China before the video-conference session was somewhat negative due to the inadequate or biased information provided by textbooks and the mass media, but after the video-conference session, they formed affectionate and positive perceptions of China. It can be concluded that cross-cultural video-conferencing increases friendliness among participants.

However, this study is limited to how the video-conference experiment can influence the perceptions of young high school students who had vague perceptions of other cultures. They were young people who had virtually no social contact with Chinese people and who

had no real conflicts with them. Even though the Japanese mass media reported situations involving bilateral political conflicts between China and Japan, the Japanese students were open-minded enough to volunteer to meet Chinese people at their own will.

In addition, this study is limited to the safe constructs of meeting via a video-conference session. This study was carefully designed so that the participants did not form negative attitudes toward others. The moderator selected a safe topic such as high school life – a topic anyone can relate to. It would be too risky to select politically sensitive topics, such as territorial issues between China and Japan or the Japanese prime minister's visit to the shrine where Class-A war criminals are enshrined. During the video-conference session, the author moderated the cross-cultural discussion so that everyone could enjoy the discussion and avoid sensitive issues.

In other words, the perception change caused by this educational program may be superficial and not enduring because it did not address the core problem that exists between the two countries; namely, their historical and territorial issues. It is necessary to design a video-conferencing course that can encourage a long-term relationship between partners. Nonetheless, impact of the video-conferencing on people's perceptions of others was positive in many ways, and the author believes that those Japanese students who now have more favorable attitudes toward Chinese people are more likely to seek companionship with Chinese people than those who do not.

The type of control that the moderator could have when conducting a video-conference can be considered to be one of the benefits of cross-cultural video-conferencing. Contrary to casual contacts and encounters without a moderator, video-conferencing is carefully structured so that an agenda can be discussed within a limited time frame, and it is possible for the moderator to control the content of discussion. In other words, video-conferencing is a reliable method that can be used in cross-cultural encounters.

Another benefit of cross-cultural video-conferencing is its ability to produce an appropriate and comfortable perceived physical distance between participants. It is possible to control the psychological proximity between participants by changing the size of the face shown in the screen. In this study, the four Chinese students were shown in a close-up in the middle of the screen, and this proved to be a good distance for the degree of closeness that the Japanese perceived in their Chinese counterparts. If there were too many people on the screen, their faces would be unrecognizable and they would feel distant. Given that what constitutes a comfortable distance between people differs from culture to culture, the ability of video-conferencing to create an appropriate degree of perceived physical distance between two parties is another benefit of video-conferencing.

Lastly, the most significant benefit of cross-cultural video-conferencing is the ability to remedy the physical distance that exists between people of a different nationality. Video-conferencing can connect geographically remote places with the help of the Internet. The author conducted this study in a rural place where students seldom meet foreigners. By using video-conferencing, it is possible to organize rare encounters in the safety and comfort

of a regular classroom.

Conclusion

This study explored how video-conferencing works toward the goal of promoting a peaceful relationship among people who do not have positive feelings toward each other. This study first described the framework used for designing an educational program aimed at changing the perception of others using video-conferencing, the technology of the educational program, and the process of implementing it. Second, the effect of this educational program was discussed using the survey data of the Japanese high school students' perceptions toward China before and after the educational program. This study concluded that cross-cultural video-conferencing could positively affect the perception of others, pointing out benefits of video-conferencing as a medium that can overcome distance, the power to control the content of discussion, and the ability to produce psychological closeness of participants.

As the world has become globalized and the emergence of new powers become more evident in the world, there is an increasing trend in cross-cultural antagonism such as that between China and Japan. This research showed that although the mass media reports the mutual dislike between China and Japan, the Japanese students were enthusiastic about meeting Chinese, and their attitudes to them became even better by the cross-cultural encounter. Indeed education is the key to reducing the distance between cultural gaps. Therefore, it is important to recognize the role of education in promoting a culture of peace. More programs for reducing prejudice and exposing students to other cultures should be implemented at schools and educators must seek innovative ways to promote a culture of peace.

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Notes

1 ）UNESCO Constitution

http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201. html

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