Opportunities and Challenges of Integrating Virtual Exchange in EFL Communication Courses (1)

仮想交流プログラム併用 EFL 英語授業の実践と課題（1）

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抄録：　大学の英語授業において仮想交流（virtual exchange、以下 VE）の機会を取り込む試みは、国外の他大学との交流を含むカリキュラムの多様化に応じて重要度を増している。この方向は文部科学省の高等教育における国際化という方向にも沿うものであり、すでに加藤・新井（Kato and Arai, 2022）において、コミュニケーション能力と異文化間理解の向上の機会として「国際バーチャル交流プロジェクト」（IVE プロジェクト）に参加し、一部必修の形態で行った実践例を報告した。今回も英語の授業において VE を利用することは、学習者の動機と学習目標にも影響されるものの、様々な学習戦略を探求する一助となり、自律学習の確立へとつながる可能性が示された。オンライン学習の活用方法や学習戦略の重要性に対する認識は、将来英語教育に携わる学生にとって必須のものとなる。今回は同プロジェクトを活用した実践例と新たな課題について参加者の意見を中心に報告したい。

Keywords: international virtual exchange, intercultural communication and understanding, learning strategies, English as a foreign language (EFL)

1. Introduction

The attempt to provide students in the Department of Education of Chubu Gakuin University with intercultural experience through participating in a virtual exchange (VE) program during the pandemic, has led teachers to integrate the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project into EFL communication courses. The integration is meant to take further actions to continue adopting the project as recommended in the findings of the pilot studies done in previous years. It is also in accordance with promoting intercultural competencies to foster global human resources as encouraged by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). At the same time, integrating VE into the curriculum could expose students to the diverse use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in connecting with international and local participants. With the increasing internet activities in education in post-pandemic times, international VEs are modifying traditional teaching and learning pedagogies. Higher education institutions have recognized the significance of VE in rapidly developing learners' 21st-century skills, such as intercultural communication, collaborative thinking skills in digital competencies, problem-based learning, teamwork, etc. (Lin, 2020; Hendarwati et al., 2021). As advanced digital technologies and teaching techniques await future pre-service teachers, the pursuit of bringing the global experience closer into the classroom is vital in equipping students with the necessary knowledge and technological skills. Also, joining an existing yet reliable VE program is practical, as managing and funding a VE program for individual teachers would be labor-intensive and expensive. This paper reports on the results

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of integrating the IVE Project into the EFL communication course in the Department of Education. It discusses the opportunities and challenges the students and teachers encounter when participating in the IVE Project.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Virtual Exchange (VE)

In this paper, the virtual exchange's definition is adopted from the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project, in which "the individual students, either themselves or in groups, interact via the internet with student peers in other countries but, importantly, under the tutelage of their teacher" (Hagley, 2021, p. 47).

2.1.1 The International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project

In the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project, online communication occurs in Moodle forums. Participants can do the online writing exchange asynchronously, but the speaking activities are scheduled synchronously. The IVE Project provides significant opportunities for students to engage in deep-culture learning while using ELF. The IVE Project is offered twice a year, during the spring and fall semesters, and is carried out over eight weeks. Participation in the IVE Project is free for all educational institutions.

2.2 Benefits and Challenges of VE as an Online Teaching and Learning Tool

Technologies can benefit teaching and learning (Rutherford, 2010) or be obstacles (Keengewe et al., 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching and learning predominated in delivering classroom instruction and have continued expanding in post-pandemic times. The role of VE as an online teaching and learning tool is enhanced as educational institutions incorporate VE in mainstream foreign language classes. Some benefits and challenges of online teaching and learning using international VEs are mentioned below.

VE programs help connect classrooms and educators to cross geographic borders. They can innovate teaching pedagogy and transform classrooms into dynamic teaching and learning venues (Hagley, 2022). They allow interaction and intercultural communication to proliferate more profoundly and socially and can reach out to more learners at different levels of proficiency (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2012) compared with the face-to-face classroom.

Kato and Arai (2022) reported that previous participation in the IVE Project allowed participants to practice and improve their English writing and reading, acquire and use new vocabulary, and hone their critical thinking abilities. It resulted in goal-oriented learners nurturing their intercultural communication competencies, validating previous findings of Hagley (2022) and O'Dowd (2011, 2021). It could provide broader training for pre-service teachers to expand their cultural and linguistic knowledge and technological skills. Thus, the experience can help them to transfer global learning to their future students. Moreover, it can broaden teachers' teaching repertoire.

Nevertheless, online teaching and learning are challenging for both teachers and learners. Abdul Halim et al. (2021) reported that learners studying online have to deal with learning difficulties, such as managing multimodal tasks and complicated contexts (Tyler-Smith, 2006), handling computer technology, and coping with internet anxiety (Conrad, 2002). The students varied learning preferences and learning styles need to be considered as well (Vonderwell, 2003).

2.3 Learning Strategies

When learners encounter difficulties in solving tasks, they develop learning strategies to overcome the challenges to complete the tasks. Nunan (1999, p. 55) describes *learning strategy* as "the mental and

communicative processes that learners deploy to learn a second language." In Ellis (2003, p. 531), Oxford (1989) describes *language learning strategies* as "behaviours or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable."

Abdul Halim et al. (2021) reported four learning strategies learners used to overcome challenges in online learning: *cognitive, metacognitive, resource management,* and *affective*.

2.3.1 The *cognitive learning strategies* use memory, repetition, resourcing, translation, imagination, auditory processing, comprehension, and other facilitating techniques which learners use in language learning.

2.3.2 The *metacognitive learning strategies* have a broader and executive function, and most researchers recognize the use of self-monitoring, adaptation, and self-regulation skills (Mitsea & Drigas, 2019). Chamot (1987, in Ellis, 2003) mentioned that *metacognitive learning strategies* include 'directed attention' (directing attention to the task, so they decide in advance) and 'self-management' (understanding of the learning situation and use effectively). Online learners tend to enhance their cognitive and metacognitive skills in achieving their learning goals by self-regulating their learning strategies (You & Kang, 2014).

2.3.3 Ahmed and Khanam (2014, p.109) mentioned that *resource management learning strategies* involve "management of learning time, management of study environment, effort management, peer learning, seeking assistance from qualified and significant others, etc." These strategies are used when learners self-regulate. Zimmerman (1989) describes *self-regulation* as how individuals manage their learning process, such as how to plan, monitor, focus on, and evaluate their own learning. Self-regulated learners proactively seek learning opportunities and self-initiate activities to promote self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-improvement (Zimmerman, 1990).

2.3.4 The *affective online learning strategies* involve the domain of motivation, internet anxiety (Tsai, 2009), behavior (Pintrich et al., 1991), as well cooperation and clarification (Chamot,1987 in Ellis, 2003).

3. Participants and Instrumentation

3.1 The study consists of first-year students in EFL Communication 2—Class A and B. Class A consists of 14 students, and Class B consists of 11 students, a total of 25 participants.

3.2 In the fall semester of 2022–2023, two courses of first-year EFL communication classes integrated the IVE Project into the curriculum. The IVE Project participation lasted eight weeks, starting on October 3 and ending on November 30, 2022. Before the class started, the teachers deliberated on how the project would be implemented and agreed to give the project a value of 10% of the grade component.

Similarly, students were given orientations on the registration logistics and how to use the IVE Project site. During the 8-week period, they were given about 30 minutes to work on the tasks in class. The activities were: 1) log in to the site, 2) read and go through the general topics, 3) read the posts of participants from other universities/countries, 4) according to their interest, students choose a topic to reply to, or 5) students can start a new topic.

Students were encouraged to work outside the class at least twice weekly to increase their participation and output. In the final week, they were to answer the IVE Project questionnaire to determine how they viewed the project and their performance. The questionnaire comprises open and close-ended questions. Of the 25 enrolled students, 21 responded.

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the opportunities encountered by the students in VE?
2. What are the challenges encountered by the students in VE?

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 When asked about their contribution to the project, five students (21.7%) responded that they did very well; ten (43.5%) did well; five (21.7%) did not do well; and three (13%) did not do very well. The final forum results showed that at least two students wrote more than 5,000 words; one more than 4,000 words; two more than 3,000 words; two more than 2,000 words; five more than 1,000 words; and the rest wrote less than 1000 words.

Several factors could influence students' performances in online learning, and based on class observations and records, students' learning strategies play a significant contribution. The forum results showed that the respondents who did well and very well consistently worked on the weekly IVE tasks and other exercises in the course and wrote more outside the class time, thus, had more output; they replied and interacted with more than one participant weekly, so had higher interaction engagement. It can be interpreted that they use different learning strategies to reach their learning goals. There is a positive correlation between language learning strategies and academic achievement in language learning, according to Ellis (2003) and Solak & Cakir (2015). Similarly, respondents who could have done better and very well, inconsistently did the IVE tasks and other exercises in the course. As observed, they showed reluctance to write by not logging in on time and intentionally not bringing their PCs.

Reluctance to do the task could be due to low interest in learning English or students' learning preferences and learning styles needing to fit with online activities. There is more significant activity output when the tasks align with the learner's learning preferences and learning styles (Gardner,1999, in Shin and Crandall, 2014) as anxiety is less. Another factor to be considered is the need for more awareness of one's strategic learning skills. Students who are aware of their learning strategies can self-regulate their learning processes (Zimmerman, 1989) and, by using adequate and appropriate online learning strategies, can have higher learning achievement (Solak & Cakir, 2015).

4.2 When asked what they have learned from the IVE Project, students learned about cultures and described interacting with others as "fun and wonderful." They mentioned that their English skills improved through conversation and found people with similar hobbies. The top five topics that interested them were: (1) sports, (2) music, (3) food, (4) hobbies, free time and culture, and (5) anime. Other topics mentioned were: idols, K-pop, school life, fashion, travel, TV, and festivals.

These suggest that the topics within the IVE Project were realistic for university students' life of diverse cultural backgrounds. The topics' high relatability can lead to interaction engagement and make intercultural communication highly possible. Also, the fact that participants read materials written by the students for the students, the materials carry more authentic and rich cross-cultural experiences and information that can stimulate learners' interest.

4.3 When asked if they would like to participate again, seventeen students (73.9%) responded that they would like to if given a chance, and six (26.1%) answered that they did not want. The respondents who answered *yes* reasoned out that participating in the project provides an opportunity to interact online with other people [*from other countries* italics added] and find it fun; they mentioned the importance of the English language for life and need more English exposure for improvement; they also realized that their performance could be improved, so they want to participate more actively next time, and the project provided ways to think critically. The reasons for not joining the project again were that the activities did not fit learners' learning style, disliked the idea that the participation was graded, and they needed to learn more as similar ideas were repeatedly expressed.

4.4 Concerning recommendation, nineteen students (82.6%) would recommend the project, and four (17.4%) would not. Those in favor cited opportunities to use English with many participants and have fun conversing with other nationalities. Some students think they learned a lot and enjoyed it, thus want to share with friends. They also recognized the possibility of interacting through writing, even with poor English abilities. Furthermore, they acknowledged that working harder and continuing the project would help improve their English. In contrast, those opposed enjoyed the project less and noticed it made students busy.

Relating to 4.3 and 4.4, the findings suggest that the IVE experience helped students realize what they had gained and needed further to become better English learners, leading them to reflect and set new learning goals. Classroom observations suggest that strategic learning can be developed and acquired through training (Ellis, 2003). While learners are on task, they observe other learners and self-reflect; they tend to imitate or adapt the learning strategies applied by learners who worked on successful tasks to self-regulate their learning strategies to raise achievement. However, learners should be warned that too much comparison can lead to anxiety.

It has surfaced again that not all of the advantages of VE are appreciated by language learners, especially "learners with limited language skills" (Hagley, 2020, p. 74). They often see difficulties as obstacles rather than opportunities to grow, resulting in poor motivation and anxiety. Teachers and peers can assist and enhance the management of learning resources and affective strategies in supporting this type of learner. In particular, struggling students who aim for good grades tend to neglect the value of linguistic benefits in quality writing, so they repeatedly write similar sentences or expressions for quantity gains. To help this type of learner, scaffolding materials should be provided to help carry out the goal of activities. Although too many provisions by the teacher will not help develop learner autonomy, some students still need assistance to cater to.

While some students see evaluation as unnecessary, other students in the previous IVE courses favored grading as a source of motivation. Teachers also noted that in the non-graded pilot courses, the members' performances could have been more consistent when compared to graded ones.

4.5 When asked about their learning strategies to work on the tasks, at least fourteen students (60%) said they read and wrote in and outside the class; ten students (43.5%) read and wrote only in class; at least four students (17.4%) shared and discussed with others what they had written on the project; and four students (17.4%) used media, such as pictures, the internet, and YouTube.

4.6 Regarding the time they spent doing the weekly tasks, more than half of the students (fourteen, 60.9%) worked on the tasks between 30 minutes to an hour weekly; at least nine students (39.1%) worked between two to three hours; and one student (4.3%) worked between three to five hours.

4.7 When asked what learning strategies they would adopt to improve their future performance, thirteen students (56.5%) responded that they would improve by posting many topics; eleven students (47.8%) responded by replying to other participants as much as possible; nine students (39.1%) responded by increasing the number of words; eight students (34.8%) responded by reading various kinds of text; four students (17.4%) responded by interacting with people from other countries; four students (17.4%) responded by interacting with people from any countries; and four students (17.4%) responded by starting a topic.

Relating to 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7, the responses showed that the IVE experience brought students to reflect on the learning strategies they applied in doing the online tasks. By reflecting, learners could monitor, critique, and defend their actions, evaluate the project (Nunan & Lamb, 1996), examine their learning preferences and styles, and plan for future actions. The students recognized that managing their time and using various learning strategies are crucial to raise classroom performance and can contribute to autonomous learning.

To cater to the cognitive and metacognitive language learning strategies, teachers can provide supplementary and scaffolding materials to develop further the learners' intercultural and language communication skills. For instance, to help improve intercultural and language competency skills, supplementary materials for "language expression" for different functions in writing exchange could provide aid to accomplish online tasks with ease, especially for learners with lower language competencies; the materials could strengthen the learners' affective states while managing their learning resources.

4.8 Students identified some challenging issues when working on the IVE Project. They realized the need to find time to log on every day; that unknown vocabulary used by the other participant could obstruct interaction; that reading speed could be complicated; and that finding the content on what to write needed some effort. Students also mentioned attitude-related problems, such as needing to be more active in opening the tablet, remembering the URL, and needing the courage to do the tasks.

Language learners often have preconceived solid ideas and beliefs in language learning (Ellis, 2003) based on their experience. Whether the experiences were positive or negative, they could shape their attitudes and affective states toward learning English. Successful learners view that they could convert the challenges into stepping stones to becoming effective and efficient. Therefore, language learners require strategic learning and a change of attitudes to address the concerns mentioned to accomplish the tasks and to develop an autonomous attitude and self-direction with reference to achieving learning goals.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990, in Nunan, 2003, p. 57) stated that "effective learners are aware of the processes underlying their own learning." They use more learning strategies than the less effective learners. For instance, proactive participants regulate their learning schedules. The record of the most active student in the previous IVE courses showed that the student consistently did the task in the morning before school, thus accomplishing more. Experts suggest that managing one's learning environment can also help increase concentration, such as finding a favorite learning space at home or school. In addition, training oneself to improve affective learning strategies, such as using positive remarks and rewarding oneself, is said to be effective too.

Teachers may also consider providing training on learning vocabulary and reading for fluency to improve reading strategy skills. To address the content issue, brainstorming before doing the tasks should be emphasized. It can also increase students' affective states as they feel more support from peers and teachers. However, Nunan & Lamb (1996) mentioned that in dealing with the affective factors —motivation, anxiety, and attitude— teachers should bear in mind that the language classroom is part of the whole institution, and teachers have no control over learners' overall learning.

5. Final thoughts

The integration of the IVE Project provided opportunities not only to encounter intercultural experiences and improve language communication skills—reading and writing—but also to assist learners in developing awareness of their language learning strategies, leading them to examine their learning preferences and styles. It allowed learners to reset their future learning goals in approaching VE as an online task. The results also allowed teachers to reflect on their teaching methodologies toward adopting VE in EFL courses and think of measures to help learners find better ways to achieve their learning goals.

It is further recommended that the IVE project be continued in the Education courses to keep the pre-service teachers updated with online techniques as pedagogical training in preparation for future teaching jobs.

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions （アンケート質問項目）

You can give us your answers either in English or Japanese. 日本語で応えても構いません。

1. How do you feel about your contribution?　自分でどれぐらい IVE プロジェクトに参加できたと思いますか。自己評価してください。

2. What did you learn from the project?　このプロジェクトからどんなことを学びましたか。

3. Why do you think so in No.2?　２の応えにたいする理由を教えてください。

4. What topics were you interested in the most? Name three topics.　どのトピックに興味関心を持ちましたか。３つあげてください。

5. Would you like to participate in a virtual exchange communication again if given a chance? Yes / No　また機会があればこのようなバーチャル交流に参加したいと思いますか。

6. Why do you think so in No.5?　５で Yes / No と答えた理由を教えてください。

7. Do you recommend the IVE project to others？　Yes / No　他の人にこのプロジェクトを勧めたいと思いますか。

8. Why do you think so in No.7?　７で Yes / No と答えた理由を教えてください。

9. How were your learning strategies in doing the project?　Check the boxes that apply to you.　どのように IVE プロジェクトに取り組みましたか。適当なものを選んでください（複数回答可）。
I read and wrote only in class. 授業中にだけ読んだり、書いたりした; I read and wrote in and outside of the class. 授業中、授業外の両方で、読んだり、書いたりした; I shared and discussed with others what I have written. 自分が書いたことについて、他の仲間と交流したり話合ったりした; I have tried using media (pictures, internet, YouTube). 写真、インターネット、YouTube などのメディアを使用した。

10. How much time did you spend for the project every week?　週に、どのくらい IVE プロジェクトに時間を費やしましたか。

11. The IVE Project will be adapted to other English courses.　What would you do to improve your performance?　この IVE プロジェクトは、他の英語の授業でも利用される可能性があります。その場合、あなたは、この IVE Project のどのような点を活かしたいですか(複数回答可)。

12. What were the most difficult things (for you) to keep up with this project?　この IVE プロジェクトを継続することで、特に困難であったことは何ですか(複数回答可)。

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