

An Attempt to Provide Japanese University Students Intercultural Experience through the International Virtual Exchange Project

国際バーチャル交流プロジェクトによる異文化体験 —日本の大学生のための国際交流の試み—

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抄録：コロナ感染症のため、多くの国際交流の機会が奪われたこの2年間であったが、オンラインによる「国際バーチャル交流プロジェクト」という英語での意見交換のフォーラムを利用する機会を得た。時差のため主に書き込みによる交流であり、双方向の会話ではなかったが、様々な文化をもつ参加者と国際共通語としての英語(ELF)を使用することにより英語力、異文化理解、異文化間コミュニケーション能力の向上にいくらかでも資することができたと考えられる。学生も教員も初めて本プログラムに参加したため常に手探り状態であったが、それでも参加者からは有意義であったという意見が大半であった。2年にわたる活動の概要と英語を指導する学科としての今後の課題等を報告したい。

Keywords: intercultural communication, communicative competence, international virtual exchange, intercultural understanding, ELF (English as a lingua franca)

1. Introduction

In the globalization era, education sectors are highly encouraged to promote intercultural understanding as societies grow more diverse. Since 2010 and 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has consistently emphasized developing intercultural competencies for global human resources (MEXT, 2021). These intercultural competencies include linguistic competencies, communication abilities, autonomy, positivity, and the ability to work actively in various fields with an intercultural mind (Hagley, 2021). With globalization, internationalization among Japanese universities has become even more competitive. Likewise, since internationalization denotes using a common language, English as a lingua franca (ELF) remains the international language. In Japan, using English in the classroom has long been dominated by a single culture, and university teachers often make decisions by themselves orchestrating how it is used. In the epoch of the pandemic, the intercultural goals remain more challenging to achieve as authentic experiences of actual encounters in international and intercultural settings have become even more limited. With the advancement of digital communication technology, virtual exchanges (VE) recently gained significant roles in school dynamics to foster foreign language learning and teaching, intercultural mindedness, and digital competence (Colpaert, 2020, in O'Dowd, 2021). This report highlights the experience of some participants of Chubu Gakuin University in the VE program called International Virtual Exchange Project (IVE Project) to encourage the development of English skills, intercultural understanding, and intercultural communication

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competence.

1.1 What is a virtual exchange (VE)?

The *Cambridge International Dictionary* (1995) defines "virtual" as "almost, even if not exactly or in every way." Therefore, the term "virtual exchange" may denote that the exchange is "almost or as nearly as real," and it can be assumed that there are "limitations compared to the real or physical exchange" (O'Dowd, 2021).

Initially, before the expression virtual exchange (VE), there were other ways of describing like: "telecollaboration" and "Online Intercultural Exchange" (OIE). Telecollaboration is commonly used in the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and foreign language education. Nowadays, "virtual exchange" has become more prominent and is used in broader areas.

In its simplest definition, VE is a form of communication taking place online between two or more people. As it deems fitting to its nature, the IVE Project adopts the definition of "where 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).

1.2 Intercultural communication competence (ICC) and intercultural 'communicative' competence

Experts give several definitions of intercultural communication competence (ICC). The definition by Deardorff's (2008, p.33 in Villar, cited in Croucher 2017, p. 253) covers several elements of ICC. He put together the descriptions given by Spitzberg and Kim as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge." According to Spitzberg (2015, cited in Samovar et al., 2017, p. 61), it is a "behavior that is appropriate and effective in a given context." Being more specific, Kim (1991, cited in Samovar et al., 2017, p. 61) described it as "the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely cultural differences and unfamiliarity, inter-group posture, and the accompanying experience of stress."

In addition to the definition of ICC above, Baker (2015) stated that the concern of English language education is intercultural *communicative* competence. He defines it as follows;

it covers a range of knowledge, skills, and *attitudes* related to interacting with those from other cultures, the ability to compare between cultures and awareness of relative nature of cultural norms and the ability to mediate between different cultures (Baker, 2016, p.79) [*italics added*].

As Jackson (2020), mentioned, Fantini and Tirmizi (2006:12) defines communicative competence as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself." To be successful in intercultural communication requires a person to analyze the situation and apply the proper behavior and language in a given case (Samovar et al., 2017). Jackson (2020, p. 220) also mentioned that "when communicating in the second language with others from another culture, it is vital to develop intercultural communicative competence." Therefore, the need to develop intercultural communicative competence among language learners needs emphasis in education.

In the current classroom situations, cross-cultural lessons have long been significant components of language education. To acquire intercultural communication skills, the students need hands-on experience

to communicate effectively with other cultures. However, as observed, even before the pandemic era, students' actual encounters with various authentic cultures were limited, so acquiring cultural knowledge about other cultures is often dependent on textbooks (Kato and Hattori, 2018). Even with the internationalization of universities, not all departments of universities have international students who can provide opportunities for actual cultural encounters. Therefore, exposure to social environments that allow students to learn about different cultures is often within language teachers' hands.

1.3 What is the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) Project?

As mentioned at the teachers' orientation and reported recently (Hagley, 2020; Roarty and Hagley, 2021), the IVE Project started in 2004 and was participated by a single class in Japan and Colombia. From 2015 until December 2020, 25,000 students and 400 teachers had participated in the program from 22 countries (Hagley, 2021). In the recent report by Roarty and Hagley (2021), 5,000 participants representing 15 cultures participated in December 2020. Representing countries were Japan, Colombia, China, India, Arabia, and Turkey, to name some. The IVE Project is free for all educational institutions in Japan and worldwide and is financed by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) *Kaken* aide.

As mentioned on its website, the project's goals were to improve intercultural competency, experience authentic communication with students from other countries, discover one's and other's cultures and lifestyles, improve communication skills, and improve digital literacy.

In the project, the communication exchanges took place in a Moodle platform in forum styles. Students could use two types of forums: the (closed) group discussion forum and the open forum. In the former, students from different cultures were grouped into 20-25 and wrote exchanges and added multimedia on their posts about a specific topic. There were four topics for the whole course that ran for 8-weeks, and for each topic, students exchanged information for two weeks. Examples of topics in the closed group discussion forum were "introductions, homes in our culture, modern vs. traditional culture, and heroes in our culture." There were various topics in the latter forum that students could freely choose and interact with, such as art and music, food, sports, hobbies, Covid 19, the news, technology, school life, movies and T.V., your future, your free time, travel, and speaking forums, and any topic of student's interest. In contrast to the (closed) group discussion forum, the open forum did not have a time limit, meaning students could exchange ideas on the topic as long as they wanted. Students found the open forum more attractive due to the choices of topics, and many participants joined. Students could also read various authentic writings and learned more cultures. In the third course cycle, students were encouraged to use both the closed group forum and the open forum and other project features, like International *Karaoke*.

2. CGU Participation

2.1 Decision makings

Some teachers from the Department of Education of Chubu Gakuin University (CGU) in Gifu Prefecture, got interested in participating in the IVE Project, which Hagley (2020, p. 26-28) reported in the JALT- TLT. The following reasons were considered in joining the project.

1. The project's goals are highly in accordance with the MEXT's plan to prepare citizens for the global world.

2. The use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) as the medium of communication meets the objective of the communication classes. As the participating schools are from countries where English is not the first language, it is an even more attractive hub for intercultural communication.
3. Due to the pandemic, online interactions are crucial to enhancing various classroom activities.
4. The project has high credibility: It operates in a secured platform (Moodle) under strict supervision; It has been tested over the years; It is a recipient of the JSPS -*Kaken* grant.
5. There is no financial expense for the participating institution.

The above were strong indicators that would highly benefit the any participants. The participation timeline started from the fall semester of 2020 until the fall semester of 2021. The highest priority for participation was to expose students to an intercultural environment to acquire intercultural experience while using ELF.

2.2 Teachers' orientation

Participating teachers attended the online orientation conducted by the coordinator. Since participants came from different time zones, several time slots were made available for everyone's convenience. In the case of schedule difficulty, a recorded video was available for a tutorial.

2.3 Students' recruitment

In the first recruitment, announcements were made in the English courses by the course teachers. Further announcements were also made in seminar classes. The announcements were in English and Japanese so students could understand the project. Interested students visited the teacher in charge for further information. Participation was voluntary for all year levels. Recruitment was open to all year levels in the first semester, except for the first-year students. First-year students were only invited in the second semester due to their adjustment to university life in the first semester. In the second and third recruitments, a video produced by an IVE participant was shown in English courses to invite students to join the project.

2.4 Students' incentives

Although the IVE project encourages teachers to reward participating students by giving additional grades, rewards were within the teacher's discretion.

2.5 Teachers' roles

Importantly, the teachers coordinated accordingly with the IVE Project coordinator and people concerned in their school. The teachers submitted the participants' names early to allow the IVE Project coordinator to enter them in the system. They attended the mandatory briefing and were encouraged to participate in the teachers' forum actively. In the forum, teachers shared concerns and received professional assistance on the project operations.

Teachers' main role was monitoring students' daily activities. Weekly forum reports were announced through e-mail and the LINE group chat. Weekly reports were also sent to relevant people in the department, and monthly updates were announced at the department meetings.

At the height of the pandemic, actual follow-ups were done online and face-to-face, as the school was on a hybrid setup. On both occasions, students remained after class for about fifteen minutes to share concerns. The students were asked to seek help if needed. However, they often claimed to be doing fine.

During the 3rd course cycle, when the typical face-to-face setting was reinstated, follow-ups were done after class once a week. Similarly, the LINE Open Chat group was used to contact students, send reminders and link

to IVE activities. In the group chat, experienced participants also offered help to the new participants.

3. Students' activities

The students were encouraged to actively participate, to experience intercultural exchange using ELF. Students can autonomously read announcements, post ideas on given topics, read other students' writings, and write responses. They should visit the website to hone their English reading and writing skills and familiarize themselves with the flow of forum activities. In the exchange, students post about topics and receive replies. Successful exchanges are usually well sustained by active participation and depended from students' language abilities, knowledge of the topic, motivation, and attitude toward the discussion. Below is a summary an exchange in the closed group.

3.1 A summary of an exchange

A CGU participant started the post on the topic *Beautiful Japanese Culture* and received replies. The participants in the exchange were Japanese- Female (Student A), Indonesian- Female (XXX-F), and Colombian- Male (XXX-M). The Japanese female participant (Student A) posted an information about the beautiful culture of the Japanese on the topic of Kimono; she invited others to respond to her writing. In response to her post, an Indonesian (Female) participant reacted to the subject of Kimono and shared a piece of information on Batik —traditional Indonesian clothing. In addition, another participant from Colombia (Male) shared about his country's costume used in dancing. The exchange halted there.

3.2 Reflection

The IVE Project could lead to acquiring intercultural communication skills if appropriately nurtured. Evidently, the information transpired and shared with other group participants, leading to cultural information and language practice sharing. Also, considering that different nationalities interacted, this intercultural experience could be unique to the participants. Noticeably though, there was a lack of communication competencies, such as the ability to sustain the exchange and end it properly. Success in intercultural communication does not depend on factors such as knowledge of the subject and language skills only (as participants' understanding of the topic and English abilities seem reasonable). Still, the motivation to continue and overall attitude (Martin and Nakayama, 2018) toward communication is necessary. Depending on the teacher's approach, this can be discussed with the participant and, with the participant's permission, can be discussed in class as a learning model to bring awareness of intercultural communication leading to the development of intercultural communicative competence.

3.3 Collaboration

The IVE Project is highly collaborative. Around two weeks before the end of the course, teachers invited students to submit questions to contribute to the *Student-Generated Survey*. Teachers from different countries voted for the questions to be included in the survey. One of our students submitted five questions, and one entry was chosen and included in the survey.

4. Overcoming challenges

The three times (3X) participation created an impression that the IVE Project is an excellent VE available

for free. However, to gain its benefits is up to the participating institutions and participants to utilize the project properly to serve their purposes while contributing to the project's existence and betterment. To experience success in participation, teachers and students should consider the challenges like motivation, attitudes —commitments and responsibilities, time, and language skills.

4.1 On teachers

Though teachers were not 100% knowledgeable of the whole project's operation initially, to keep learning the operations is essential. Lead teachers are encouraged to coordinate appropriately with colleagues and students. Based on the overall performance in the first and second course cycles, there was a need to improve this area. To correct this, in the 3rd-course cycle, implementing the weekly face-to-face follow-up with students showed some improvement resulting in mentoring opportunities and friendly interactions. At the same time, teachers could immediately identify urgent issues that needed attention. For example, those unsure of who to respond to or what to write instantly received help; the "Kohai-Senpai" atmosphere was also influential, as experienced participants could mentor the new ones. Thus, it provided support and boost the participants' morale.

4.2 On students' motivation and attitude

In the beginning, the excitement was high in joining the project, but apparently participation decreased. Based on the weekly forum report, the log-ins declined from the 5th week and 6th week and eventually dipped on the 7th and 8th week. Students' motivation was hard to sustain, and the best remedy was to keep the reminders coming. Depending on the level of motivation some attitudes were noticeable.

4.2.1 The Passive students

A confession by a student revealed that he read all the written posts contributed in his group. It can be assumed that students gained cultural and linguistic input through reading, indicating satisfaction with "one's achievement." Considering that individuals possess different learning styles (Gardner, 1999, in Shin and Crandall, 2014), the participants practiced total autonomy to approach their own learning to cater to their interests. In this case, participants who enjoyed reading can still benefit from participation, yet, it is essential to find solutions to support these students.

Another observation was that students see the opportunities as difficulties, and accomplishing tasks were for compliance only. Hagley (2020, p. 74) reported that "students with limited language skills often cannot realize all the advantages of VE. Nevertheless, there are many positives they can attain when participating in a simple VE." Since the nature of the IVE is to communicate through writing, students do not actually see that they are gaining benefits both in language use and developing skills toward intercultural communication competence. In the future, the countermeasure for this is to provide precise orientation to the students and make them understand that in VE, there is a need to write authentically in expressing their thoughts in order to connect with other participants. That by nurturing those interactions, they can gradually develop intercultural communicative competence.

4.2.2 The Active Students

In an interview with the most active participant, it was confirmed that motivation and attitude play significant roles in the success of the exchange.

Question: Was there a time you were hesitant to reply?

Answer: No, there were choices. Sometimes, I could not reply to all of them. If I found someone I could follow, I followed him. I think what is most important is continuing. (Interview with the participant on Jan. 21, 2022)

Here, the participant showed proactive attitude, "the willingness to do something for oneself by oneself," and recognized the need to keep the exchange going for everyone's benefit and the project itself. The positive attitude to willingly carry out the tasks even without any incentives still resulted in a higher performance level. The forum report revealed that the participant posted six times, replied 120 times, viewed 753 times, and wrote 26,636 words. The participant also submitted a video recording to interact in the speaking forum and participated in the real-time speaking activity. The particular student also volunteered to create a promotional video to invite new participants. Overall, the participant demonstrated the key attributes required for successful intercultural communication competence —goals, "motivation, attitude, knowledge, and linguistic skills" (Martin and Nakayama, 2018), resulting in the successful IVE experience.

4.3 Reflections

Although it was challenging to sustain motivation for active communication with other participants and promote a positive attitude until the end of the program, to some extent, the participation provided awareness of one's level of motivation and attitude towards own learning. As VEs are gaining brighter impetus in education, participants will most likely encounter VEs in their future teaching careers. They can look back on the experience of how they handled the intercultural challenges they met in the project. A student suggested that motivation can be raised by finding ways to measure accomplishments. Though it could favor the highly motivated students, it could be stressful for the less motivated ones. Some students thought that grading could improve motivation and participation, but mostly expressed concern about losing the freedom to enjoy the project. In future participation, teachers will consider implementing goal-oriented activities to challenge students to be consistent in their involvement and raise performance levels. Looking at the active participant's technique of interacting, finding someone to follow and interact with that person, can help participants motivate each other and increase performance.

4.4 Time and commitment

Other challenging factors to be considered are time and commitment. Students mentioned their part-time jobs and school responsibilities needed to be attended to first. Since the participation was voluntary, commitment could influence performance. Some class periods (seminars and English lessons) needed to be set up for them to work on posting and replying in the forum with other members. In the future, to gather highly committed participants, asking students how much time they can actively contribute to the project should be emphasized at the orientation.

4.5 Language skills

Lower language abilities were not a hindrance to participation. To accommodate learners with lower English abilities, resources to support linguistic skills are necessary. Teachers will consider compiling English expressions useful for language input to help students produce quality output to increase confidence. In addition, the "bilingual resource corner" at the library prepared for the IVE Project to support students should be well-publicized.

5. Results and Recommendation

One theme that emerged in the survey was English learning and teaching. Students admitted that the project provided opportunities to practice and improve writing in English, read a lot in English, and acquire new vocabulary and uses. On the brighter side, participants with enough English skills could practice writing English with some ease, and they found opportunities to think and express themselves in English in ways they cannot find elsewhere. Contrastingly, participants with lower English skills and confidence struggled to express their thoughts in written English; thus, they wanted more assistance from teachers in writing, such as giving examples of better English expressions and vocabulary, and overseeing work. In particular, it was mentioned that students could reply at any time at their convenience. Also, there is time to prepare for written responses to make more prolonged interactions, which would be hard to sustain if actual English interactions were done in person-to-person. Although the project can cater to students with different English levels, the cooperation of teachers and students is essential to maximizing the opportunities that the project offers. If indeed given proper guidance by the teachers, interactions in the exchange can be nurtured and could develop of communicative competence.

As expected, participants admitted that there was cultural awareness, particularly about knowing one's culture and that of others. Students affirmed that cultural differences exist among and within countries, thus leading to different ways of interpreting things. The project has led them to discover English varieties and styles of using English according to countries and developed a perception that users are friendly. Participants, have undoubtedly gained intercultural experience and gotten exposure to intercultural communication.

Participating in the project also led the students and teachers to self-reflect. Some students found that reading and writing were not enough to enjoy English, so they desired for speaking activities as well. Students value participation as they get to do more considerable challenges for themselves.

Similarly, the participation brought awareness to the importance of VEs in language education. Teachers think the department should adopt VEs. According to reports, VE integration into the curriculum facilitates higher chances of its success (Roarty and Hagley, 2021). However, simple VEs can also enrich intercultural exposure that fits the learner types in the department. Indeed, the participation was an eye-opener for participants.

To conclude, the participation in the IVE Project was an excellent opportunity to experience intercultural environment, promote intercultural awareness and develop intercultural communication competence and language communicative skills. In particular, participants acquired and shared knowledge of cultures and practiced their English language skills—reading, writing and eventually speaking. The gain from this experience, was far more from the challenges encountered, as the challenges turned out to be stepping stones to visualize active participations in the future. As Hagley (2020) mentioned, VEs are becoming significant in EFL classes and are getting more recognized worldwide. Hence, VEs should be considered for adoption. Since the school does not have much opportunity to provide international experience to our students for free, and owing to the fact that VE programs are hard for an individual teacher to operate, the IVE Project offers one of the richest opportunities, with all its beneficial features.

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Appendix 1: Tables

Table 1: Forum Report (Username and Student names are changed to protect the identity of the students)

User-name	Student Name	Country / Institution	Posts	Replies	Unique days active	Views	Unique days viewed	Word count	Multi-media	First post	Last post
A	A	Japan/Chubu Gakuin U.	2	38	11	150	11	4208	5	Sat, 8 May '21, 8:40 PM	Wed, 2 June '21, 11:17 PM
B	B	ditto	1	7	4	40	7	336	0	Tue, 11 May '21, 12:30 AM	Wed, 23 June '21, 11:23 AM
C	C	ditto	0	9	6	138	17	957	0	Fri, 21 May '21, 6:34 PM	Fri, 18 June '21, 11:55 PM
D	D	ditto	1	12	8	64	10	842	5	Sat, 8 May '21, 2:55 PM	Thu, 24 June '21, 12:08 PM
E	E	ditto	3	16	10	76	17	1182	0	Wed, 12 May '21, 6:18 PM	Thu, 24 June '21 4:55 PM
E	F	ditto	6	120	31	756	42	26636	101	Fri, 7 May '21, 9:13 AM	Thu, 17 June '21 3:11 PM

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

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. 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。
2. Did the project meet your expectations? このプロジェクトは期待通りでしたか。
a. Yes/No b. Why? (理由があれば書いてください。)
3. Would you like to participate in a virtual exchange communication again if given a chance? 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せんか。 a. Yes/ No b. Why?
4. How can a teacher support you in this kind of project? この種のプロジェクトで教員が助けることができるのはどんなことでしょうか。
5. Do you think grading will increase students' participation? 成績をつけることで参加者を増やせると思いませんか。 a. Yes/No b. Why?
6. Do you recommend this project? このプロジェクトを他の学生にも勧めたいですか。 a. Yes/No b. Why?
7. Do you recommend this project? このプロジェクトを他の学生にも勧めたいですか。 a. Yes/No b. Why?
8. How do you feel about your performance? 自分でどれぐらい出来たと思いませんか。自己評価してください。
9. Right now, we are offering the IVE Project to the students from the Faculty of Education. We want to reach as many students from the other faculties to broaden their intercultural communication perspectives as well. That can also give Chubu Gakuin University more participants in the project. 現在教育学部の学生が対象ですが、他の学部のできるだけ多くの学生にも異文化コミュニケーションについて学べるようにこのプロジェクトを紹介したいと思います。そうすることで中部学院大学からの参加者が増えることが期待されます。

Would you like to help in promoting the IVE Project? We will contact you to have assistance in making a promotion video to invite students. IVE プロジェクトについての広報活動に協力をお願いできますでしょうか。広報・紹介ビデオの作成に手を貸していただける人はご連絡ください。 a. Yes/No

Thank you. 以上