

Chapter 9

Case Study 4, Japan: Incorporating Virtual Exchange into the English Communication Classroom



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1 Background

University students worldwide now generally require an understanding of not only English, but also how it is used in the globalized society in which they live and work. No longer can English classes be “just English.” In modern ESL and EFL classrooms, language teachers need to be able to develop their students’ intercultural understanding along with their communication and other transversal skills. Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) aims “to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan’s global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations” as outlined in The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development (MEXT, 2012). Language education throughout Japan has started to embrace the “establishment of programs focusing on understanding of multiple and different cultures” (MEXT, 2010). However, in regional Japan, actually meeting such goals is difficult as there are almost no opportunities for students to physically meet and interact with foreigners or use a foreign language in everyday activities. This was until Virtual Exchange (VE) methods of teaching started.

The position paper on Virtual Exchange created by the INTENT project group (2014) states that “VE are technology-enabled, sustained, people to people education programs. These entail the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural exchange, interaction and collaboration with peers from partner classes in geographically distant locations, under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” (INTENT, 2014). The benefits of VE have been outlined in Lewis and O’Dowd (2016), such as improvements in language ability, development of intercultural understanding, and improved communication ability, though in the same volume, a number of pitfalls are also detailed. These include organizational issues, problems

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with students not engaging deeply in intercultural exchange and situations where an “illusion of commonality” (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, cited in Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016, p. 277) develops. If the pitfalls can be overcome, the benefits are many. VE helps teachers meet the lofty goals outlined above by MEXT. It gives them the ultimate tool to ensure their students are able to fully participate in a global community and use the language they are studying to be active therein, in addition to improving their intercultural understanding.

The students in this case study are studying to become engineers in several different fields at a regional university in northern Japan where, as outlined above, there are few opportunities to use English in an international setting. To ensure they have such opportunities VE was introduced to the English communication classes that are taught by the author. Lee and Song (2019) note that VE seems to have comparable value to study abroad to ensure development of intercultural understanding. Improvements in pragmatic competence is another of the many positive outcomes of VE (Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016). It is therefore easy to understand why VE would be incorporated into such classes.

Implementing VE, however, can be a daunting prospect for many teachers. This case study outlines a method of incorporating VE into one English communication course in Japan, but could be used as a basis for other countries too. It will illustrate how teachers can easily ensure their students gain benefits therein while also offering a method of integrating it into the syllabus. The research question for this case study is: *How do students who have participated in virtual exchanges react to this mode of learning?*

2 Case Study

2.1 Participants

This case study looks at students who participated in the English communication classes from the past five years, both first and second semesters, at the university in northern Japan. Most of the students starting the course had limited English proficiency in the CEFR A2 to B2 range, and low motivation to learn English. They had all done the mandatory six years of English that is standard in Japanese junior and senior high schools. The English communication class is a compulsory component of their engineering degree and is considered a “small-class” course though there are never less than 20 students in a class and sometimes the class size has been as high as 30. The focus of the class was to improve the students’ communicative ability in addition to broadening their understanding of other cultures.

2.2 *Project Description*

The English communication course is 15 weeks in length. The university's curriculum policy notes that English communication ability, in particular oral communication, needs to be developed and this course is one of the main means of doing that. To ensure that students have to use the English they are learning in class, they participated in the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject—iveproject.org) as part of the course: each class was partnered with another class in at least one other country. All classes were partnered with classes from Colombia and some of them also included classes from one or two other countries. Students then used the English they were studying in class on Moodle forums to exchange information in text, audio, and/or video formats on very simple topics that are related to their own culture. More recent iterations of the IVEProject have developed and the method they are carried out is different but for this research, the method outlined above was used.

To give the students the necessary scaffolding required to participate in the exchange, students had access to the course page provided by the author. This was also created using Moodle. It was used in place of a textbook with all materials in the course created by the author and included creative-commons licensed materials. Students were able to access these materials in class via computers, as the classes were carried out in computer labs, or out of class from any internet-enabled device. Materials included listening, reading, writing, speaking, and intercultural understanding activities. Each activity was closely related in theme to those covered in the IVEProject. Lessons were based on Crabbe's (2003) course design which notes language teaching should involve extensive input, opportunities for output, and negotiation of meaning which should also include opportunities for students to rehearse language forms, specific skills, and communicative routines. Teachers also need to give appropriate feedback and offer ideas on language and how it is best learned. More information on the type of course design used in these classes is outlined in Pang (2018).

A typical class would begin with group work where students would review some of the common mistakes made in the previous week's IVEProject forum posts. After groups had finished their corrections, these would be shared with the other groups via a link on the Moodle course page to a Google Doc. In real time other groups and the teacher give feedback and the best "correction" adjudged. After this, the teacher introduced the topic-of-the-day via a role-play that encouraged students to use a particular language form. The form would then be explicitly introduced and students would work on fluency by practice using the form. Listening activities involving the form would then be carried out, with this class having elllo.org materials embedded in the Moodle course page. These involved student interactions, with students listening to different audio files and sharing ideas with their peers in order to rehearse using the forms. The teacher gave feedback and informed students they could use those forms in the IVEProject to interact with students in other countries.

Assessment of students' interactions in the IVEProject took a number of forms. Firstly, for each topic covered a rubric is used. The rubric gives specific goals for

students to achieve. Rubric criteria include the type of content created, the quality of that content, and whether the student used multimedia such as self-made recordings. Another aspect of assessment revolves around the final exam. This included a speaking part where students participate in a 10-minute role-play. On the day of the test, students are randomly assigned partners and one of two roles. One of the roles involves the student taking on the persona of the students they had been interacting within the IVEProject. Both roles are given to students at the beginning of the course so they know precisely what they have to do. These roles are practiced three times throughout the term. As partners and roles are randomly assigned on the day of the exam students cannot memorize their roles. The role-play is recorded and uploaded to the Moodle course where the teacher assesses it afterwards again using a rubric to assign a grade.

This course requires technology to be used. Obviously, the course itself and its contents are online so technology is required to access it. The IVEProject also requires students to use technology to interact with their partners abroad. The exam role-play recordings are made using Audacity and uploaded to the Moodle platform for assessment. It is therefore essential that students are given enough training to use the technology. In the situation described above, students are given time in class to practice using the various tools and the platform and online video tutorials are also made available to students. As students learn how to use these online tools, their transversal skills are also developed. Some may say this is too much for the students to do while practicing their language skills. However, the data below shows that this is not the case and that students appreciate the online technology and how it can be used for intercultural communications.

2.3 Data Collection

Over the past five years, and using the Moodle questionnaire module, students were asked their views of the course materials and the VE they had participated in. A 4-point Likert scale was used, with “1” being “strongly agree” and “4” being “strongly disagree.” The data presented here include the northern hemisphere spring and fall classes’ data. It covers students’ views of their participation in the VE, the use of only online materials as opposed to a textbook and their views of the speaking exam. A total of 519 students gave valid responses to the survey. These are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 Students' opinions of an online course ("S" is spring, "F" is fall)

	14S	14F	15S	15F	16S	16F	17S	17F	18S	18F	Av
(N = Student number)	24	26	48	42	65	40	125	40	43	66	51.9
Interacting online with students in other countries has value	%	92	96	84	83	86	83	91	86	93	88.3
	M	1.6	1.4	1.8	1.7	1.7	1.8	1.7	1.5	1.8	1.5
	SD	.65	.58	.87	.87	.74	.85	.68	.74	.75	
Through the online interaction, I believe my English has improved	%	79	74	54	64	73	59	60	58	65	65.2
	M	2.1	2.2	2.4	2.2	2.1	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.2	
	SD	.58	.69	.70	.85	.70	.74	.69	.73	.84	
Using online materials is better than using a textbook	%	88	77	77	89	75	81	78	68	71	78.2
	M	1.7	2.0	2.0	1.9	2.0	2.0	1.9	2.2	2	
	SD	.69	.91	.82	.89	.83	.80	.88	.81	.91	
Overall, the online learning system used was good	%	92	77	71	71	76	71	69	82	73	74.1
	M	1.8	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.1	2.2	1.9	2.3	2.1	
	SD	.56	.73	.71	.88	.78	.76	.67	.75	.83	
If there is a speaking exam I feel I need to speak more in the class	%	92	92	77	76	84	75	78	73	71	78.8
	M	1.7	1.8	2.0	2.1	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.1	2.0	
	SD	.62	.69	.77	.86	.73	.80	.78	.87	.97	
The speaking role-play exam is easier than a paper-based exam	%	10	20	17	10	12	30	26	19	26	19.8
	M	3.3	3.1	3.3	3.4	3.2	2.9	3.1	2.9	3.0	
	SD	.82	.91	.84	.83	.78	.86	.88	.89	.90	

3 Results

Over a five-year period, the results outlined in Table 1 suggest that students appreciate the value of VE but understand that it is not the only thing required to attain language proficiency. An exceptionally high average of 88.3% of students believed that their participation in the IVEProject was of value. For VE in general, Godwin-Jones (2019, p. 10) notes “the fact that students in (VE) are engaged in meaningful communication with their partners inevitably draws them into the need to go beyond vocabulary knowledge and grammatical accuracy to contextually appropriate language.” This is the case for students participating in the IVEProject.

Though positive, with an average of more than 65% believing the IVEProject helped them improve their language competence, students were not as enthusiastic regarding its influence on their language improvement. The average total of 65.2% suggests they understood that participation alone will not lead to better English language ability. Obviously, students need to participate more to improve and these students understand the importance of doing so. This is one reason why participation in the IVEProject is contingent on students being a part of a class with a teacher involved. Teachers are essential to ensuring the success of the exchange and also to developing students’ linguistic ability. How teachers do so varies greatly but the figures above suggest that students believe the use of technology in that learning process is beneficial. Over 300 teachers have participated in the IVEProject to date and most continue to use it suggesting they also agree.

An average of 78.2% of students believe the use of technology is better than the use of a textbook alone. The reasons for this perception are many and include the fact that online resources can incorporate easy-to-access multimedia and listening materials, with international communicative tasks also being quick and easy to participate in. Students use textbooks in all their other English classes so understand the difference. It is important to note that this is not a comparison between traditional textbooks and e-books. The platform used was Moodle, the most-used Learning Management System (LMS) in the world. It is not an e-book. Moodle offers much more than e-books do, with students being able to interact with each other, the teacher, quizzes, listening activities, and, via the IVEProject, students in other countries. Thus, all major language skills can be incorporated within Moodle and can be both practiced and assessed therein.

It is important that all the different aspects of an online course come together. It would seem that this particular course’s different components did this quite well with an average over five years of 74.1% of students believing that the overall online learning system was good. Students need to be able to access the materials easily from multiple devices—in class computers, smartphones, and their home computers. If the course page looks different on any one of the devices or different browsers, confusion can occur. Throughout the five years a link to the IVEProject was placed on the course page and students could easily access it from there. On only one occasion, an LTI object was placed in the course instead of a link. More research needs to be done on which method was more seamless, but initial student feedback to the

teacher suggested that the simple link was preferred as students wanted to access the IVEProject directly. The comparatively low 59% given to the overall learning system in the spring of 2018 when the LTI was used gives credence to this.

As oral communication is of particular importance in this class it was crucial to include activities where oral communication occurred and include feedback to students. As outlined above, in this course students had many opportunities to speak during the class. A common comment in the comments section of the questionnaires was “*compared to other English classes, I was able to speak a lot in this class*” and “*I enjoyed being able to speak in English.*” However, without the extrinsic motivation of assessment, students often will not participate as fully as they should. The author therefore thought it was important to include assessment of the students’ oral production and connect it to their participation in the IVEProject. The results here suggest students saw the benefits of that with an average of 78.8% of students believing the speaking exam was a motivating factor for them to speak more in class.

Though not EFL related, Huxham et al. (2010) note that many students believe oral exams are more useful and can be more inclusive than written exams. The results from the last five years in this class show that students certainly do not believe the spoken exam is easier than the written one, but it motivates them to participate in in-class speaking activities thus showing a positive washback effect. Fewer than one in five of the students believe it an easier assessment task than a written one.

4 Pedagogical Principles

There are a number of important pedagogical principles that arise from this case study: the value of VE; the need to integrate technology into mainstream language learning; and creating authentic contexts to practice speaking.

- a. *Realize the value of VE*: firstly, and most importantly, VE is considered valuable by students studying English communication in EFL settings. More and more VE are becoming mainstream with the UniCollaboration group offering several options, SUNY’s COIL program being another. The IVEProject outlined here is also a simple way for teachers to access a truly international VE.
- b. *Integrate technology into mainstream language learning*: if students are going to participate in VE, they have to use technology. Offering them assistance to understand how to use the technology is an obvious necessity. However, if more of the syllabus already requires the use of technology, students will be less likely to have problems accessing the VE. It is no longer difficult to incorporate technology into the classroom. Moodle, as outlined in this case study, is one of the more popular options but there are others such as Google classrooms. As outlined above, students often see the use of these as both beneficial and better than the use of standard textbooks. Through their use, other transversal skills are developed that include IT use and the ability to communicate well online. It is therefore also essential to include teacher training on a regular basis as part of

faculty development and also for teachers to be pro-active in joining workshops put on by technology-based teaching associations.

- c. *Creating authentic contexts to practice speaking*: if teachers want their students to communicate orally in English, they should encourage them to do so with an understanding that English is a lingua-franca on the world stage and that understanding different accents and dialects is a useful skill to have. This can be achieved by participating in an international online exchange where audio and video are used. It follows that teachers should include oral exams as part of their assessment as this is appreciated by students and motivates them to speak more in class. It also improves the authenticity and washback of the exams.

Though there are many positives to take away from this case study, there are also some limitations. The fact that the surveys only used a four-point scale is one. The next five-year plan will use a broader scale. In addition, the questions were all single constructs, meaning construct validity could not be tested. However, that similar results obtained over a five-year period suggests that they are reliable.

To conclude, this case study makes a strong case for incorporating VE into EFL communication courses. It goes further to suggest that technology should also become a part of such classes as it will assist students in their participation in the VE and benefit them in other ways too. If oral communication is to be a part of the EFL course, then additionally, oral exams incorporating technology should also be included and the case study offers a means of doing so.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank the IVEProject research team I work with: Thom Rawson, Adam Jenkins, Matthew Cotter, Yuka Akiyama, David Campbell, and Hideto Harashima. Also, all the teachers and students that participate. This research has been carried out with the assistance from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Kaken grant #19H01277.

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