

Opening the Door: Using the International Virtual Exchange Project to Enrich Discussion Classes

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Abstract

This paper reflects on using The International Virtual Exchange Project (IVE) as a means of broadening students' perspectives and developing their intercultural competencies by allowing them to interact with other students in different countries around the world. In total, 85 students took part in the study. I utilized a mixed methods approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data in the form of class notes and a Google Form, respectively. In general, students gave positive impressions about using IVE, stating that it helped improve the content of their discussions, their motivation to study English and their written English. This paper closes out by suggesting that integrating the IVE Project into the Discussion syllabus boosted students' participation and satisfaction of the course.

Keywords: Virtual exchange, intercultural competency, global, online

Introduction

In the age of technology and information, it would seem inevitable that telecollaboration would enter the education sphere. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the inception of such programs has quickened the calibration of platforms into language programs (Jager et al, 2020). In fact, the Japanese business federation Keidanren recently placed the skill of intercultural understanding as being on par in importance with English competency (Hagley, 2021). Virtual exchange (VE) is a domain of online foreign language education that has experienced substantial growth and change in the past number of years (O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019). It is a contemporary, economical and pedagogical approach for boosting global proficiency and intercultural competencies through transboundary and multicultural learning environments via virtual platforms (Bijnens et al., 2006; Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016).

The participating students in this study were all enrolled in the English Discussion Class (EDC) module, a 14-week course taken by all first-years students who are required to discuss contemporary topics using a variety of marked language functions. The primary goal of the course is for students to acquire the ability to discuss topics fluently and to have balanced and interactive discussions about current topics in English with their peers (Hurling, 2012). By frequently uttering these functions, learners gradually develop a stronger network of associations between these features while also gaining a deeper understanding of the contexts in which they occur (Ellis, 2002).

Each class consists of nine or ten students, with each student placed into classes with other students of a similar English competence. The semester began with conventional face-to-face classes with each class being 100-minutes in duration. Due to COVID-19 protocols, all students were required to wear masks and had to remain in the same seat for the entire lesson. I made seating charts for each lesson beforehand to ensure that students were sat next to different classmates in the next lesson. I would use the ready-made seating chart to guide students about who to speak to when speaking practice was commencing, which was useful and efficient. Instructors were advised to keep

a distance from students whilst they conversed, which made monitoring all the students effectively in groups somewhat challenging. After each practice or discussion, I would give verbal feedback and written feedback via the whiteboard and facilitate student-to-student feedback. After three weeks of teaching face-to-face, the classes were moved online. To scaffold the language functions that the students would use in each forthcoming class, I would add a Google Slide to depict the usage of the language function. I would also embed relevant YouTube videos related to the topic of each chapter in the textbook to help the students think more deeply about the topics beforehand.

The International Virtual Exchange Project

In the previous academic year, I had used asynchronous discussion board forums in each of my discussion classes. The main aim of these forums was to allow students the chance to practice using the language skills of the forthcoming discussion lesson, as well as letting them share their ideas about the topic that they would discuss in the next lesson. The results of using these forums were positive. Students reported finding new ideas, thinking more deeply about the topics, and organizing their discussion ideas before the lessons began (Mahoney, 2020). This year, I wanted to expand on these forums by entering my students into the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVE from here onwards).

The genesis of IVE came from a need of connecting students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan with students studying English in other countries and allowing them to use the English that they are studying in class to communicate (Roarty & Hagley, 2021). IVE first began in 2004, initially with one class from Japan and Colombia, and has now expanded to include 11 countries with around 5,000 students participating in the exchange (Roarty & Hagley, 2021). IVE has been funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Kaken grant and is complementary for participants (Hagley, 2020). IVE transpires on a Moodle platform where students can exchange information in a variety of ways including text, pictures, audio and/or videos (Roarty & Hagley, 2021).

In the May-July 2021 IVE, 3885 students from a total of 18 different countries were selected and posted on the forum. The main participating countries were Japan with 2100 students (54%) and Colombia with 1127 students (29%). The other most active countries included Indonesia with 211 students (5.4%), Mexico with 90 students (2.3%), India with 78 students (2%) and Turkey with 60 students (1.5%). A total of 5007 students signed up to participate in the project, but COVID-19 and other problems restricted many students from the different countries from participating fully.

Procedure

In the first lesson of the semester, I introduced the students to the syllabus and the grading system for the discussions class. The students were advised that 50% of their grade would be evaluated on their general participation, which involves how much effort they make in each class, the amount of language functions that they use and their attitude towards their fellow classmates; 30% would be from three speaking tests in which they are solely evaluated on their language forms usage and 10% would depend on homework, which was a weekly quiz from weeks 2-13 about the reading section of each topic in the textbook. IVE would run from weeks 4-12 in the semester, and I advised students that this would be 10% of their final grade. During the 8-week duration of the project, students were required to make a minimum of two posts per week. I reminded the students of this

requirement when giving them feedback after each class via email and an announcement on the class homepage on BlackBoard. I posted the link of the IVE website directly below the reminder to encourage the students. Further, I advised students that it was fine to talk about any topic and use any English that they knew and that they should try to enjoy using the platform and use the language functions that we would be using in class, such as opinions, examples, points of view, and follow-up questions. My guidance was influenced by O'Dowd et al. (2020) who proposed that teachers need to provide 'pedagogical guidance' when harmonizing VE into the classroom. Each student was placed into a different group of around 25 other students participating in IVE. In this group, students were encouraged to introduce themselves and share their culture with their group members. The Group Forum was broken down into four main topics that would span the duration of the project. The topics were as follows: Who we are (05/03-05/23); Student life in our cultures (05/24-06/05); The cultures around us (06/06-06/19) and Gifts (06/20-07/03). Participants were also able to post in the Open Forum, which was a place where all participants could post and interact with one another. The Open Forum had 14 topics, including *Art & Music; Your Future; Speaking; COVID-19; The News; Sports; The Environment; Movies & TV; Travel; Food; Politics; Technology; Your Free Time and School Life*. Students were allowed to reply or post new threads on both the Group and Open Forum.

In week 7 of the semester, the topic of the lesson in the textbook was the globalization of Japanese culture. Students were required to discuss which Japanese culture they thought was most appropriate to share with the rest of the world and why. I gave the students a task that week to specifically share their favourite Japanese culture on IVE. In this way, the lesson content directly overlapped into their usage of the IVE. This strategy was founded from O'Dowd et al (2020), who suggested that teachers integrate students' own online interactions into class work. Since students made a total of around 500 culture-related posts (including food, travel, music, favourites, gifts and manga & anime), I believe that this was something that the students truly found interesting to chat about.

Discussion and Findings

Student participation

A total of 1040 posts or replies were made by the 85 participating students, which is an average of 12.2 entries per student. Twenty-eight students (33%) made 17-24 entries, whilst twenty-five students (30%) made 8-16 entries. Five students (6%) made 25-32 entries and one student made 84 entries. Twenty-six students (30%) made 1-7 entries, which was less than the required amount for a full participation score. These figures would seem to suggest that most students participated spontaneously for their own recreation as opposed to participating only as it was a homework task.

Gender differences

Out of the fifty-six female students, thirty-six of them made a total of 84 posts (a post refers to initiating a new topic on a forum). Twenty female students did not make any posts (36%). This calculates an average of 1.5 posts per female student. The female students made a total of 700 replies (a reply refers to a student replying to another student's post on a forum), which was an average of 12.5 replies per student. A total of 34,103 words were written by the female students, with an average of 608 words written per student. Out of the twenty-nine male students, nineteen of them made a total

of 56 posts, which was an average of 1.9 posts per male student. Ten male students did not make any posts (38%). The male students made a total of 234 replies, which was an average of 8 replies per male student. A total of 12,219 words were written by the male students, with an average of 421 words written per student. These figures would seem to suggest that the female students participated more actively, by writing more words and posting more replies. However, the male students were more likely to initiate new topics by making posts. This finding concurs with findings by Mahoney (2020) that male students were more likely to initiate new topics on digital forum platforms.

Topics

The most popular topics that students discussed on the forums included food (110 posts), favorites (90), travel (80), music (80), sport (63), culture (60), manga & anime (60), movies (56), COVID-19 (56), and gifts (35). Students participated in around 50 different topics overall, ranging from superstitions, politics, pets, love and being eco-friendly. This wide range would hint that the students appreciated the wide range of topics and the function of being able to create topics of their choice. One recurring theme was that the students would often compare the food of their local area to that of other Japanese students. The vigorous participation of students in topics such as travel and COVID-19 could be related to the current pandemic. Many students posted in forums such as “Where would you like to travel after the pandemic?” Students also posted often about how the pandemic has affected their lives, whether it be studying or being unable to meet friends.

Advantages

In the final class of the semester, the students were poised with a discussion question: “What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the IVE Project”. By the 83 students who were present in the final class, 97 advantages were given. I will now cover some of these.

Usefulness to connect with foreign people and learn new perspectives

In total, 52 students indicated that the major advantage was connecting to foreign people:

It is useful to connect with people far away and share cultures from home.

It is great to communicate with foreign people who speak different languages for the first time.

It was a rare opportunity to exchange my opinion with people all over the world.

I could choose a topic I want to know about and discuss deeply.

Receiving replies from people around the world gave me new perspectives and ideas.

I could learn other viewpoints and broaden my horizons.

I could learn a different way of thinking.

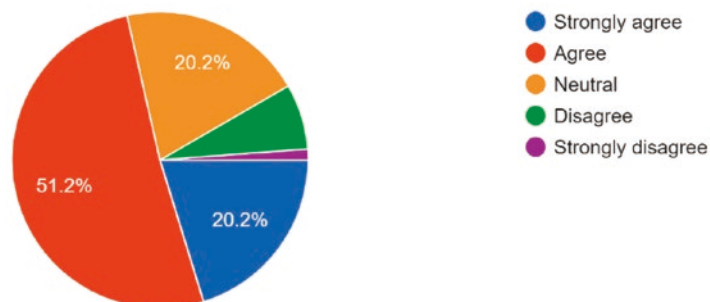
Since students took lessons online from week 4 to week 12, they may have felt isolated from their friends or society. Therefore, this digital platform provided them with a place to share their ideas and feelings whilst also practicing their English. Moreover, four students indicated that they used pictures to illustrate their feelings and culture. The referral by one student that they used the website as something akin to a diary would seem to suggest that the website served as a quasi-therapeutic tool for some during the pandemic. This positive feedback has also been reported by Jager et al (2021, p.22) who argue that VE offers “a more accessible, inclusive form of learning for all

students.”

This positive feedback of authentic interaction supports findings by Hagley & Cotter (2016). This result also correlates with the fact that 70% of students made the minimum of two posts per week as I requested of them. In the Google Form survey (Figure 1), 71.4% of students agreed with the statement that it was fun and interesting to chat to other students on IVE (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

“It was interesting and fun to chat to other students on the IVE Project.”



Improving writing skills and learning new expressions

Two other advantages that were prominently mentioned (7) were improving writing skills and learning new expressions:

I could improve my writing skills, deepen my knowledge about topics and learn new expressions.

I could improve my reading and writing ability and get confidence and power in using English.

I could learn to express what I wanted to say in the discussion classes.

The main goal of this class was to furnish an environment in which students could converse in English about subjects in that they are familiar with. These utterances suggest that not only did IVE help students practice their ideas and learn expressions for their classes, but it also allowed them to improve their writing skills by interacting in an authentic way. In the Google Form survey, 52.4% of students agreed that IVE improved their English ability and motivation to study English. Although 29.8% indicated a neutral stance to this statement, 59.5% agreed that IVE improved their ideas and use of discussion skills in the classes.

COVID-19 news

A final advantage worth mentioning (6) was the license to discuss news, especially that which was COVID-related:

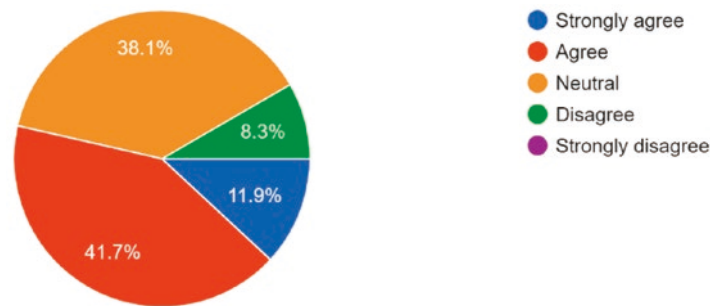
It was an advantage to learn what is really happening in the world. We don't really know when we watch the news.

We could easily post and learn about the world. It was a good opportunity and a valuable source of information during the COVID-19 disaster now.

Having the ability to get other sources of information was precious for the students. In the unparalleled times of COVID-19, different countries have been affected in different ways, and the news is therefore reported through the lens of that nation's government. Some 53.6% of students

Figure 2

“Seeing other people’s viewpoints changed my view of the world.”



agreed with the statement that seeing other people’s viewpoints changed their view of the world (see Figure 2.)

Disadvantages

The 83 students in the final lesson expressed disadvantages of using IVE a total of 39 times. There were two major disadvantages indicated by students. I will now discuss these.

Too many Japanese students

The most prominent disadvantage mentioned by students (15) was that they were too many Japanese students. Since the May-July 2021 project contained a total of 54% Japanese students, this complaint was understandable:

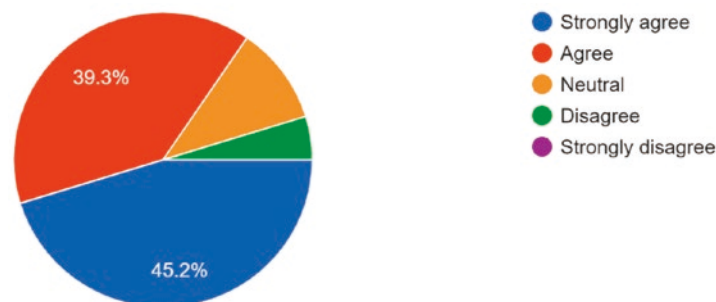
There were too many Japanese students. It was strange discussing Japanese culture with them in English. Talking to many Japanese students was not interesting.

There were limited countries. I would like to talk to European students.

Whilst this was mentioned as the biggest disadvantage in the final class, 74.5% of students agreed that sharing their culture and learning about other cultures was interesting (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

“Sharing Japanese culture and learning about other cultures on IVE was interesting.”



Therefore, although the students may have wanted more exposure to different nationalities participating, it could be argued that they enjoyed learning some new aspects of Japanese culture

from other Japanese students who lived in different areas of Japan. Since the topics of food and culture were very popular, this would seem likely to be the case. One student did specifically highlight this: *It was fun to share food culture with different prefectures in Japan.*

Website issues

The other main disadvantage expressed (14) was frustrations with the useability of the website. Since IVE is still a relatively new project, this may be logical:

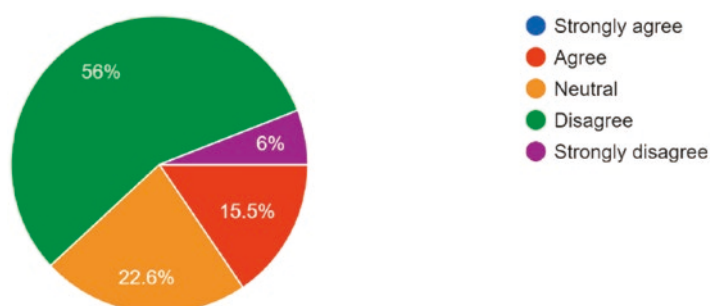
The web format was hard to use and interact.

It was hard to find replies to my posts.

It was hard to use. Twitter and Instagram are easier.

This concern has been highlighted by Hagley (2021), who voiced that some students may not have adequate ICT skills to navigate the site smoothly. Despite this being mentioned as the second biggest disadvantage, a total of 62% of students disagreed with the statement on the Google Form that IVE was troublesome and not useful for learning English (see Figure 4). Only 15.5% agreed with said statement. Students were advised that they could use the website or the Moodle application on their phones, but it is unclear if they heeded this advice.

Figure 4
“Using the IVEProject was troublesome and not useful for learning English.”



Cultural differences and grammar worries

Some other notable disadvantages indicated by students included cultural differences and grammar worries (3 and 4, respectively). Since IVE had students from over eighteen countries participating, and this was sometimes the first time for some of my students to communicate with foreign students, this drawback would seem to have been inevitable:

There was a gap in value. We should read carefully what foreigners write and try to understand them.

Chatting to foreigners was nuanced and hard to understand.

I was worried if I could accurately convey my feelings in English.

I could not check grammar, so I was nervous about making mistakes and posting.

The students' concerns about making grammar mistakes concur with findings made by Mahoney (2020) and Neilsen (2013). However, this drawback is mitigated by the fact that more

students indicated that the platform improved their writing ability in the discussion in the final lesson of term.

Conclusion

In a time of great stress, uncertainty, and isolation, it has never been more important for teachers to be flexible and to help their students achieve their study goals. The COVID-19 pandemic has understandably caused a reaction in the education industry in exploring the delivery of online classes and VE. With students taking classes at home and a constant flow of negative news from the media about the ongoing pandemic, it may be difficult for teachers to produce inspiration and give students motivation to try their best, especially in a language that they have been studying for over a decade already. By entering my students into the program, which had some overlapping themes to the textbook that they were using in the discussion class, I believe that this elevated motivation and piqued students' interest in the module. This quasi-recreational language usage would concur with Ellis (2014, p.42), who argues that one of the most important principles any teacher should take into consideration is to allow students to engage in "language play" and to form an "emotional identification with the target language". Overall, student participation in the project was active, and most students did more than what was required of them to earn participation points in their score, suggesting that the platform went beyond studying and served as a place where students could make authentic connections and express themselves during a time of great hardship.

Teachers who enter their students into VE programs must devise a means to provide students for what Sauro & Chapelle (2017) refer to as 'langua-technocultural competence', which is where linguistic and cultural abilities collide via VE platforms. Since no two VE platforms are the same and all interactions between users are unique, teachers must be ready to support students and scaffold their interaction to make it meaningful. I would concur and suggest that teachers are obligated to offer students pedagogical guidance, yet that they should also consider taking a step back to give students the freedom to allow their language skills to grow organically in the VE setting, without too much pressure of evaluation.

In the gloom of the pandemic, it has become necessary for teachers to find contemporary ways to enliven their classes. Implementing VE could be a way in which they can attain the goals of language retention, practice and cross-cultural interaction. From the findings of this study, it could be argued that IVE was a useful tool and is a project that will continue to grow organically in the age of information.

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