

PROMOTING MULTICULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND GLOBAL EXCHANGE USING CALL IN EFL CLASSES AND CLUB ACTIVITIES AT A RURAL KOSEN COLLEGE

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Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the return to in-person international exchange programs has been unexpectedly slower than it was before 2020. Although the interest remains for highly motivated students, taking the first step in participating in overseas study abroad programs remain the hardest to take for rural National Institute of Technology (henceforth referred to as Kosen) students. In this study, we observe English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classes taught using computer-assisted language learning (CALL), as well as members in an after-school club activity which aims at fostering students in learning more about other cultures and languages. It is also observed if the intrinsic motivations of these participating students can be pushed into a more proactive participation in overseas study abroad programs, as well as learning more about and understanding foreign cultures, even if on their own free time. In the EFL classes, high school level students (aged 15 to 18) were tasked with presenting in groups as a major task of their annual syllabus. First year students had to introduce Japanese culture to first time visiting foreigners to Japan in English, second year students created their own short movies, with scripts that were completely written originally by the members, and third year students were tasked with creating promotional tourism videos of various locations and attractions of their prefecture. Whereas in the international club, exchange students and foreign-born professors and staff taught about their home country, culture and language, where not only club members were invited to participate, but also students who were not part of the club but were still interested and wanted to attend. It was seen that student membership in the club increased as part of these activities, but there was no connection seen to increases in participation in overseas programs. Students responded to surveys based on their class and club activities, as well as those who participated in exchange programs. Some positives mentioned were that students were able to learn and experience different cultures from the comfort of their own school campus. However, one source of concern that will be discussed is the contents and context of currently organized study abroad programs, and how they do not always necessarily

reflect the needs, goals, and points of interest in their programs to attract motivated students. Discussion about ideal study abroad programming based on students' perspectives and from previous research will also be reviewed.

Keywords: *multicultural understanding, global exchange, student motivation, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL)*

Introduction

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the push for international exchange in Japan was increased with likely correlation to the incoming Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic games. However, with border closures quickly becoming commonplace around the world, the future of many students who were planning on studying abroad had disintegrated in front of their eyes, with no concrete prediction of when it would again be possible.

While the world switched to online and distance learning to keep up with the times, it was hard at first to find ways to relate this international exchange. As easy as it is to communicate to anywhere in the world in the internet age, the analogue concept of having to physically go abroad to experience things in person as being the be all end all was hard to shake off at first.

In retrospect, the concept of these online exchange programs was discussed before the pandemic hit, such as the discussion of 'virtual exchanges' brought forward by O'Dowd (2019) in their research. Collaborative online pedagogical projects done in and out of real time with cooperating institutions in foreign language learning showed promise, but also some limitations. The predicted future outcomes did come true during the pandemic, and some were even attempted in this study as well.

The subjects of this study were all National Institute of Technology (henceforth referred to as Kosen) students, which is a polytechnic adjacent kind of educational institution unique to Japan, in which students aged 15 to 20, and sometimes to 22 if they choose to stay and complete their respective advanced course, study various fields of engineering with the goal of being future global engineers, able to use their unique educational background and communicative competence to work and help others anywhere around the world.

Methods and Pedagogy

The students in question were observed in two kinds of situations. The first was as part of their mandatory English communication classes – 90-minute classes once a week for 15 weeks in the first and second terms. Students are divided by their field of engineering, which in this case were 4; mechanical, electric and electronic, computer, as well as civil and environmental engineering. There was no division by level or linguistic ability in these classes. Some students were confident in their English abilities, others had studied abroad before, and some also disliked learning the language or about other cultures entirely. They were marked across various assignments, like presentations, to receive credits.

The mandatory classes observed were first through third year students, all having a major summative presentation assignment as a significant (20% or more) portion of their final marks. First year classes had to present on an aspect of Japanese culture they want visiting foreign tourists to know more about before or when they arrive. Next, second year classes were tasked with creating an original short film, including a script from scratch and having to record and edit the final product themselves, based on a unit in the textbook that could be used as supplementary material in future years.

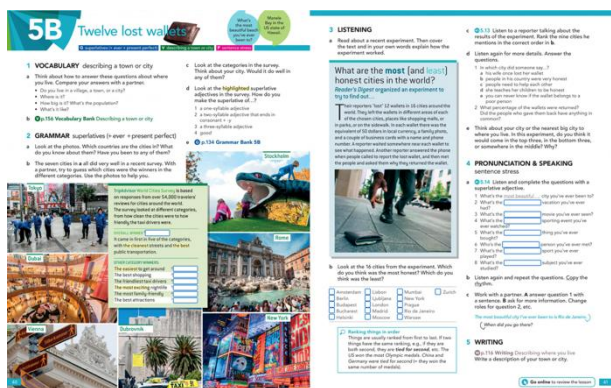


Figure 1, A unit of the textbook which students would base off for their original storied video presentations

Finally, third year students (the newest addition to the current mandatory communication English classes) were tasked with presenting local tourism videos, based on their unique perspectives of youth brought up in the prefecture, targeting the increased number of inbound visitors to the prefecture post pandemic.



Figure 2, third-year students gathering to watch their finalized original local tourism videos made in English

Each grade of students was then asked to fill out a survey anonymously at the end of the school year to observe their rates of satisfaction with the presentation projects, their sources of satisfaction and concern, as well as reflections on how it may have potentially changed their perspectives of this unique kind of global promotion from a local scale.

The second group of observed students was made of members of the international club of the Kosen college. The club was formerly known as the English club, which focused mostly on English language activities, and participating in speech and presentation contests. However, over the years, the club members showed more interest in other languages and cultures other than just English, and thus the club was re-named to the international club, and the activities expanded to learn many other languages and cultures, including English.



LearnEnglish
Magazine
Easter

Easter is the most important festival of the year for most Christians and a holiday for many others. Read on to find out more about it.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary	Definition
1. to mark	a. the ability to produce new life (babies, plants, etc.)
2. a triumph	b. a baby bird
3. a chick	c. to celebrate an important event
4. pagan	d. belonging to a religion which existed before the main world religions
5. fertility	e. a victory or success
6. holy	f. related to a religion or god
7. a procession	g. eating no food for a period of time
8. fasting	h. a group of people walking in a formal way as part of a ceremony

Easter

The meaning of Easter

Easter is a Christian festival which marks the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For many Christians, Easter is a celebration of the triumph of life over death, and a very important time of the year. Many non-Christians also have a holiday at this time, so it is a popular time to travel or spend with friends and family. We see lots of symbols of new life at Easter, especially eggs, chicks, flowers and rabbits. These symbols go back to ancient pagan traditions which celebrated fertility, rebirth and new growth after the long winter months.

When it is celebrated

The dates of Easter change from year to year but it usually falls sometime between the end of March and the end of April. In Western Christianity, Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the first full moon of spring, which starts on 21 March. The Eastern Orthodox churches, which use a different calendar, have a slightly different way of calculating Easter and usually celebrate Easter a little earlier or later.

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Figure 3, An example of a cultural learning mini lesson in English about Easter as an international club activity

These students were more highly motivated than the average of those in the mandatory communication classes and had shown previous interest in studying abroad as well. Unfortunately, a cohort meant to study abroad to New Zealand was cancelled just days before the planned departure due to border closures from both countries at the very start of the pandemic, so there was clear frustration and disappointment for those who had paid for and planned to go, but had their dreams shot down by something that was unpredictable at that time.

However, despite the pandemic keeping these students at home, and later domestically, there was interest shown by a previous collaborative institute of higher education in the United States, that suggested participating in online exchange activities to make up for the lack of being able to visit in person like they would have before. A previous study by Hiroike & Yokomizo (2022) about using Flipgrid, at the time also known as

Flip, detailed their original program of online exchange with students at an American university that was incorporated into one of their lessons, in which students were regularly tasked with short video message-like presentations that would act as international exchange between the physically far distanced students, and making them interact like friends by cross-posting as well as interacting with the posts of others as well.

This activity was mimicked as the first main endeavour for the international club students at this Kosen college with the previously in-person interacted university. Conveniently, the partner institution had previous experience in such exchange using Flip, so each month, students were tasked with posting on a specific topic – from self-introductions and general small talk, to slowly but surely progressing to more detailed and increasingly difficult topics, such as describing their hobbies one month, and then the next going into detail about the historical significance of their local festivals.

As part of this video exchange activity, students were tasked to post once a month, and to comment on three other posts from the partner institution as part of their monthly exchange activity. Participation was not mandatory for all members, but most members did show interest when first hearing of this new kind of activity.

At the end of each semester, international club students who had participated, and those who chose to refrain from the online international exchange, were surveyed about their perceptions and satisfaction of this kind of activity, and if they found it to be a valuable option (or temporary substitute) of studying abroad.

Results and Discussion

First, to begin with the presentations tasked in CALL based EFL classes, the student satisfaction rate was high across all grades, which was reassuring due to their varying levels of English abilities, and the lack of previous experience in somewhat formally presenting in English to an audience of their peers for most of the first-year students. Some of the students mentioned that having the topic about introducing Japanese culture let them choose a topic they were familiar with, which made them feel more at ease presenting, but also that they learned more about the specifics of their chosen topic by researching it in more detail, as opposed to just going off of common knowledge and practice in their daily lives.

Table 1, Results of student satisfaction surveys regarding their designated presentation task and theme

	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year
Very satisfied	73%	81%	13%
Satisfied	12%	14%	60%
No strong opinion	9%	4%	11%
Unsatisfied	6%	1%	8%
Very unsatisfied	0%	0%	8%

Overall, all years had over 70% satisfaction rate ('satisfied' and 'very satisfied' combined) which reassured the validity of the task assigned. Some of the

students mentioned in their anonymous free feedback that they 'wished they would be able to do an in-person information session for new visitors' based on their presentations and wanted to 'show' their presentation to 'athletes that are staying in the Tokyo 2020 athletes village, so they can experience local Japanese culture even under lockdown'.

Second year students tasked with the originally scripted short movies had their highest levels of satisfaction, likely due to the freedom of creativity of their final products. Even if they were marked on a specific criterion in their rubric, detailed in Figure 4, the comments in the free feedback showed that the biggest struggle was with the actual editing and finishing the video, as they had not previously done tasks like these before in any of their other classes.

	FAIL (1)	POOR (2)	OK (3)	GOOD (4)	GREAT (5)
SPEECH MESSAGE					
Was the English fluent?					
Was the speaking natural?					
Was the vocabulary correct?					
PHYSICAL MESSAGE					
Was the student confident?					
Was the acting believable?					
Did the script seem real?					
VISUAL MESSAGE					
How was the video quality?					
Were the subtitles correct?					
Were non-talk scenes valid?					
SUITABILITY					
Did the content follow unit's?					
Was the teamwork balanced?					
Is it appropriate for class?					
FEEDBACK					/ 20
TEAM NAME					
TEAM MEMBERS					

Figure 4, Rubric for the second-year video presentation

Finally, the third-year students tasked with local promotional tourism videos showed the lowest level of satisfaction, even if it totaled at 73%. One of these discrepancies are thought to include it being the first time the students were given this kind of task and not having their school seniors be able to give advice or suggestions on how to succeed in the task, like previous years.



Figure 5, QR code to see the top 8 local tourism videos produced by the third-year students as voted on by peers

However, even with having the lowest rate of satisfaction from the students, the feedback was the most reassuring of its validity in global exchange from a local perspective, including one group of students commenting 'We were not sure what kind of higher-level of

presentation we would have to do in our third year after the short movies we did last year, but doing local tourism videos seemed like a natural step from last year'. Another group of commented that 'Being able to talk about local spots that only we know as youth, as opposed to the often overly focused standard tourist traps, made it feel like our voices were actually being heard to people overseas'.

Regarding the international club activities, the number of active members almost doubled during the pandemic, with a portion of the members participating in post-COVID study abroad programs, but there was no significant correlation found to the rate of total participants in the in-person programs to those of students being active members of the international club. In fact, some students mentioned greater dissatisfaction than non-club member participants, stating their 'expectations were probably too high for the study abroad program', showing a unique paradoxical situation that may jeopardize the status of the international club.

As for the participation in monthly online Flip-based video interactions, the club started off strong but then decreased their proactivity very quickly with some students choosing to keep masks on during their videos, or just not showing their faces at all in their videos. The more students would shy away from exposing themselves even to the restricted online group (purposely made so that people without the link could not see their videos for privacy reasons), the more their peers would follow suit.

This is likely due to cultural differences in the Japanese and American students, who have unique perceptions in their online presence. The American students would often be very outgoing and show a lot more of themselves, whereas international club students tended to be shier and more reserved, including in their video responses to each other. Written comments did not show much difference however, which was somewhat reassuring, but also showed that the visual aspect of showing their faces online still is a big hurdle for Kosen students, especially voluntarily, unlike in the study the activity was based on (Hiroike & Yokomizo, 2022).

Conclusions

The presentation tasks given to students in their mandatory English communication classes has a high level of satisfaction, and also student feedback reassuring that they were able to promote their local Japanese culture (especially for first years), and also give back to their communities by promoting local tourism hot spots in their newly designated third-year presentation task. The full details of the third-year local tourism presentation activity and feedback of the project as a whole will be published at a later date this academic year.

It can thus be concluded that regardless of students having varying levels of English and confidence in their skills, students appreciate having an outlet to express themselves and their culture through presentations, even if mandatory and marked on as part of their course. These unique presentation ideas will now further be promoted to the international club, to hopefully give students a greater creative outlet to create newer and more unique presentations, detailing their areas of interest more fully.

However, what was expected to be a great interactive activity for the perceived higher motivated international club students, did not necessarily reflect their genuine interests. Even if they were given an outlet to meet, mix and mingle with peers their own age and with similar interests from around the world, the interpersonal communication was still a barrier for the club students.

The concept of simultaneous, real-time interaction can especially be considered effective in reducing the communication barriers Japanese Kosen students feel due to prevention of over-preparation that is often seen as a barrier for speaking. Students often show confidence only if they thoroughly prepare and memorize a script translated from Japanese, but simultaneous interaction is a more realistic and spontaneous skill-based output task.

Although domestically, it is often considered that interpersonal communication with strangers for Japanese students is a hurdle, it can be greater for Kosen students, who are often quite shy to begin with. One suggestion could be simultaneous interactions in real time, instead of having to record videos of themselves talking and then posting it online and waiting nervously for a response. The only barrier to real-time interaction would be time zones, with which the collaborative American institution being a full 13 to 14 hours difference with Japan.

Perhaps geographically closer locations, such as those in southeast Asia would be seen as a more practical area, also with similar cultural understanding and standards, which may lead to more openness in communication between the international student body.

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