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Intercultural Exchange between Japanese EFL Students and International Students

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Abstract

Many universities have a language exchange center where international students teach their native languages to local university students who wish to learn. This study was conducted at a private university (University A) in Japan that has a language exchange center, where students can interact in person with international student language leaders. In this study, the language exchange center and an advanced-level elective English course for third- and fourth-year students collaborated for a pilot project. The following questions were explored in this study: (1) What did English as a foreign language (EFL) students learn? (2) What did the language leaders learn? (3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of this collaboration project? Questionnaires and interviews were conducted with the EFL students and language leaders. The findings showed that the collaboration was effective and meaningful for the EFL students and the language leaders. Finally, recommendations are provided for future language exchange centers and language classes based on the findings of this study.

Keywords: cultural understanding, higher education, intercultural communication, language learning, language teaching

Introduction

This study was conducted before the pandemic occurred, when many international students were studying at Japanese universities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2021). Many uni-

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versities facilitate interactions between international students and other students (Gondou & Hirakawa, 2010) or local people (Watanabe, 2011), and this includes opportunities for language exchange such as monthly gatherings at coffee lounges or opportunities to learn international students' native languages. Language exchange centers facilitate conversational language learning in a casual atmosphere with no textbooks (Tarykina, 2017). Such exchanges are enjoyable and provide a great opportunity to not only learn each other's language and culture (Sueshige, 2017) but also make new friends. For example, students studying English as a foreign language usually just practice with their instructors and classmates, which does not provide them many opportunities to interact with international students studying at the university. The classroom environment is not always conducive to authentic contact with people from different cultures (Lee & Markey, 2014). According to Byram et al. (2002), English language education needs to prepare students to interact with people from other countries and cultures, because it is crucial for them to understand and appreciate the unique international perspectives, values, and behaviors. English language instruction should broaden students' learning to include cultural skills (Katsumata & Guo, 2020; Popescu & Iordachescu, 2015). Language exchange centers allow students to interact with international students, share their thoughts, and develop cultural competence. Although many students participate in these activities, some students do not know about such exchanges, think they do not need to improve their foreign language skills because they are already highly proficient, or avoid them because of their lack of language skills.

The Language Exchange Center at University A

The language exchange center at University A is a place for international exchange through communication in foreign languages (English, Chinese, Korean, and others) with international students enrolled at the university who serve as "language leaders." The EFL students meet language leaders in the language exchange center, where several sessions with regular language leaders are often in progress simultaneously. There are one-on-one sessions, as well as group sessions with up to six

students and one language leader. These sessions allow students to learn about the culture and lifestyle in the language leader's country of origin, to share information about Japanese culture, and to discover and learn various other details through conversation.

This language exchange center is used by the high school, middle school, and elementary school students affiliated with University A, as well as university staff, working people in the neighborhood, and alumni. Although it is available to many people, the idea for this pilot project came from a desire to see whether the center could collaborate with courses in language and other subjects at the university. After discussing the matter, the language exchange center manager and the researcher decided that the center should collaborate with the advanced-level course in English presentation skills, which is for third- and fourth-year students.

Objectives of the Advanced-level English Presentation Skills Course

In a society where diverse cultures coexist, there are increasing opportunities to give presentations in English to people from various cultural backgrounds. Many researchers have emphasized the importance of supporting cultural understanding and sensitivity in interacting with people from other countries (Altshuler et al., 2003; Bennett et al., 1999; Paige, 1993; Pruegger & Rogers, 1994). As English has become more widely used, the native languages of ESL/EFL speakers have proliferated and more varieties of English have appeared (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). Therefore, it is important to use English to learn about multilingual cultures and values. Furthermore, it is imperative to learn intercultural communication skills and competence, which refer to the ability to communicate and interact effectively in different cultures through English education (Deardorff, 2006; Lustig & Koester, 2013; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Mastery of a foreign language does not necessarily mean learners can communicate well with native speakers (Byram & Feng, 2004; Canale & Swain, 1980; Finkbeiner, 2008). Previous studies (Erling, 2005; Kilickaya, 2009; McKay, 2003) have pointed out that English instruction should focus on intercultural communication. Inter-

cultural communication is not taught in many English courses in Japan, which means that Japanese students can communicate in English, but their style reflects the way they communicate in their native language (Katsumata, 2014).

In this course, students make presentations on various topics, exercises, and research conducted in class. Students acquire more practical English presentation skills that are useful in an international society, and also develop their English discussion skills through question-and-answer sessions. Students who feel uncomfortable giving presentations in English or who have avoided doing so in the past can acquire these skills before they enter the workforce if they are proactive in their efforts.

The course objectives are to enable students to

- (1) give presentations in English in front of an audience;
- (2) conduct audience analysis;
- (3) consider the cultural differences between the presenters and listeners when speaking;
- (4) deliver information in English; and
- (5) ask and answer questions in English.

The following is a description of the four presentations (Table 1) that students are required to deliver during the semester (Shibuya et al., 2018). The first presentation is a self-introduction of two to three minutes in duration. Self-introduction appears simple enough, but the challenge is to make an impactful or unique self-introduction that will be remembered by people from abroad.

Table 1*Project Chronology*

Date (2019– 2020)	Class	Language exchange center special sessions	Preparation for special sessions
Sept. 19			Deciding the dates of collaboration, sending the list of EFL students by email
Sept. 26			Meeting with language exchange center managers
Sept. 24	Explanation of the project		
Oct. 8	1 st presentation: self-introduction		Meeting with 1 st language leader
Oct. 15		1 st session with the 1 st language leader	
Nov. 5	2 nd presentation: <i>Pechakucha</i> format		Meeting with 2 nd language leader
Nov. 12		2 nd session with the 2 nd language leader	
Dec. 3	3 rd presentation: academic presentation with Q&A		Meeting with 3 rd language leader
Dec. 10		3 rd session with the 3 rd language leader	
Jan. 7	4 th presentation: video about Japanese culture	Watch 4 th presentation video	
Jan. 21	Questionnaires and interviews	Questionnaires and interviews	

The second presentation is an informative one, using the *Pechakucha*¹⁾ format. The word *Pechakucha* means “chat” in Japanese and refers to a storytelling platform that is used by many people worldwide. In recent

1) <https://www.pechakucha.com/about>

years, it has also been used in conferences. It consists of 20 slides with 20 seconds of explanation per slide. The *Pechakucha* platform allows the presenter to speak for 7 minutes or less while creating a visually appealing story.

In the third presentation, the EFL students present their research field. The presentation, lasting 10 to 15 minutes, is given in a format similar to an academic conference, with a question-and-answer session afterwards. Since many students feel uncomfortable with question-and-answer sessions (Shibuya et al., 2018; Yashiro et al., 2019), they practice this skill during activities before the presentation.

For the fourth presentation, the EFL students are divided into two groups and asked to make a video introducing Japanese culture to the language leaders. The theme of the video is decided by the EFL students. For example, one is about university students' dating in Japan, and the other is about Japanese university students' job hunting.

The presentations are recorded on the EFL students' cell phones so that they can watch their own presentations later. After the presentation, each student receives feedback from their classmates and teacher. The presenters write a reflection report based on their video and the comments from classmates and teacher and submit it the week after their presentation.

Overview of Special Sessions of the Language Exchange Center

Description of the Special Sessions with Language Leaders

This pilot project took place in the 2019 fall semester. As Table 1 shows, a meeting was held with the manager of the language exchange center to discuss the session contents, meeting with the language leaders, and the schedule. The researcher requested that the three language leaders should be from different countries so that the students could learn about various cultures. The researcher met with each language leader beforehand to confirm the content; each meeting was held in the language exchange center a week in advance because language leaders needed time to prepare for the sessions. In the language exchange center, the leader usually decides the topic to be discussed; however, since this project was a collaboration with a class, the researcher requested that the

content align with the course content.

The researcher was provided the choice of holding the sessions in the classroom or in the language exchange center. Since the language leaders were not available during class hours, it was decided to hold the sessions in the language exchange center during lunch break. Three sessions were held with the language leaders, and they were given the option of watching the student videos together at the end of the semester. This project comprised 30% of the class evaluation.

Selection of the Language Leaders

The three language leaders were selected by the manager of the language exchange center. Two were from different English-speaking countries and one was from a non-English-speaking country. According to the manager, there are 26 to 28 language leaders each semester. The three language leaders for the special sessions were chosen from among those who could conduct the session during their lunch break on a particular day, who were suitable for the session, and whose countries of origin did not overlap. Before selecting a language leader, the committee members of the language exchange center ensured that the person spoke fluent English if it was not their first language.

Meeting the Language Leaders

First Session

The first session with the language leader involved self-introductions. Before this session, the EFL students delivered a presentation in class to practice introducing themselves and ensure they were comfortable participating in the session with the leader.

The researcher asked the first language leader to do the following.

- (1) Provide all students with an opportunity to speak.
- (2) Talk about the differences in self-introduction and what kind of self-introduction content is included in the language leader's culture. As an example, the researcher explained that Japanese students talk about the same things and often share information such as age, club activities, and hobbies.
- (3) Explain any differences in the way that students and business people greet each other when they introduce themselves.

- (4) Describe the content that should be included when introducing oneself to foreign students.
- (5) Introduce the communication styles of the language leader's culture.

Second Session

The second presentation was informative, so the researcher requested that the language leader ask about the EFL students' presentation topics. Since the topics were different, the language leader was requested to ask various questions and to talk freely about their opinions and impressions on the topic.

Third Session

For the third session, the researcher requested the language leader to ask the EFL students' specialties and research topics. This was a good opportunity for students to explain their research in an easy-to-understand manner, since the language leader's specialty was different.

Research Questions

Language learning sessions, such as those involving the language exchange center, often focus on how much English the EFL students have learned. However, this study focused on not only the EFL students' learning but also that of the language leaders through their interaction with advanced-level students, and how they made the session meaningful for both parties.

The following questions were explored in this study.

- (1) What did the EFL students learn?
- (2) What did the language leaders learn?
- (3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of this collaboration project?

Method

This study used qualitative methods to extract the research results and analyze the questionnaire responses and interviews of the language leaders and EFL students.

Participants

The participants were seven students enrolled in the elective advanced-level English presentation skills course, and three international

students engaged as language leaders.

This course did not have English level requirements; however, according to the results of the questionnaire, the EFL students enrolled in this class had scores between 850 and 970 on the Test of English for International Communication. Five of the EFL students had previously spent time abroad, ranging from one week to nine years. Three of the EFL students had previously used the language exchange center as part of a class assignment, either in high school or during their first year at University A. Since most of the EFL students had a high level of English proficiency, they did not think they needed the language exchange center to improve their English.

Research Instruments

Questionnaires and interviews were conducted with the EFL students and language leaders. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, but these responses were not analyzed quantitatively because the sample was too small to produce robust quantitative results. Different questionnaires were developed for the EFL students and the language leaders, and both questionnaires were compiled in English. The EFL students completed the questionnaires on the last day of class, while the language leaders were asked to respond by email through the language exchange center manager. The language leader interviews were conducted in English and the EFL student interviews were conducted in Japanese.

The fourth presentation was a video introducing Japanese culture, and only language leaders who were able to watch it together were asked to participate. The two language leaders who were unable to participate were sent the video link and asked to provide their feedback later by email.

Results

This section summarizes the responses from the EFL students and language leaders as well as comments from their interviews.

The Number of EFL Students in the Special Sessions

In response to the question “How many students will be good for student engagement in the special session?” two EFL students answered

“two to three students,” three answered “four to five students,” and two answered “six to seven students.”

One of them commented that “We should divide the groups of the language exchange center so that one person can talk a lot.” In the interviews, all the EFL students said that dividing the group in two would have given each person more time to talk to the language leader. One EFL student commented, “If the purpose of the interaction is to learn English, it is best to talk more and discuss in depth in a small group chat.”

The language leaders’ responses to the same question varied, with one answering “four to five students,” one answering “six to seven students,” and one answering “eight or more students.” This suggests that the language leaders felt it was more appropriate to have a larger group of people than the EFL students did.

The Number of Special Sessions

The EFL students’ responses to the question “How many special sessions would you like to have?” were as follows. Three EFL students answered “three,” two answered “five,” and one each answered “two” and “four.”

In response to the same question, two language leaders responded “three” and one responded “two.” Both the EFL students and language leaders had similar numbers, but the EFL students were slightly more interested in increasing the number of sessions.

The language leaders stated that they enjoyed the sessions, had in-depth conversations with the EFL students, and thought that both sides had learned from each other. Based on these results, it is clear that language leaders can also benefit from interacting with advanced-level students through in-depth discussions about their cultures and communication styles during these special sessions. A language leader commented that “I think if language leaders and students met more often it could lead to interesting topics that concern the whole class.” Another language leader said “It would be nice to use quiz questions during interactions.” Therefore, the researcher would like to use the same language leader for more sessions in subsequent special sessions.

Topics of the Special Sessions

Regarding the item, “Please write topics you would like to discuss at the special sessions,” the EFL students responded that they would like to discuss hobbies, university student life, job hunting, and the presentation themes, amongst others. One said, “Prepare topics that will trigger conversations and do not limit yourself to other topics. The longer the interaction time, the better.” Another EFL student commented that “If the language leaders are not too busy, we could have more opportunities to talk, like the last class of the semester.” On the final day of class, the EFL students presented a video introducing Japanese culture as the fourth session, and had invited the language leaders to join them. Unfortunately, only one of the language leaders was able to join the class, but they enjoyed the conversation that developed from the questions in the video presentation and had more time for discussion.

The language leaders commented that they would like to discuss problems in modern society; and what students notice about society; what they want to change about society, technology, culture, music, movies, games, and social media. In the special sessions, the EFL students mainly talked about the content of their class presentations, but the language leaders wanted to talk about hobby topics, such as movies, and then, gradually, about social issues. Talking about movies and social issues may diverge too much from the course content of an academic presentation skills course. If a future collaboration takes place, the researcher would like the EFL students to present on a social issue that interests them and then hold a special session to discuss it.

The Level of Intellectual Challenge in the Special Sessions

Regarding the question, “How would you rate the level of intellectual challenge you experienced in the special sessions?” almost all of the EFL students responded with a very high rating. Two answered “good” and five answered “very good.” This indicated that the special sessions were challenging and provided good learning opportunities for the EFL students. Most of the EFL students had a high level of English proficiency, so they found it very enjoyable to interact with the language leaders. One EFL student commented that it was more of an opportu-

nity to learn about each other's culture than to learn English.

Two of the language leaders responded "fair," and one responded "very good" to the same question. The researcher believes that the language leaders probably need to have a deeper discussion on the topic to make it intellectually challenging for them.

Evaluating Each Other

The EFL students rated each language leader in response to the question "How would you rate the quality of the language leader?" Almost all of the EFL students responded with a very high rating. Two language leaders were rated "very good" by all the EFL students. The other language leader was rated "good" by two EFL students and "very good" by five EFL students. This indicates that the EFL students were highly satisfied with the three language leaders. The EFL students were impressed with the way the language leaders had prepared for the special sessions. One commented that "I wanted to have more time to do some of the quizzes that the language leader had prepared for us." The language leaders prepared various topics in advance for discussion, which was very helpful. One EFL student commented that "The language leaders made sure that each of us had a chance to speak" and others said that "The language leaders planned the topics so that we would not get bored." Another student commented that "A language leader gave me suggestions for the fourth video."

The language leaders were asked "How satisfied are you to have had the students in the special sessions?" and all three responded with "Very Satisfied." One language leader commented that "The students were all thoughtful and intelligent, and their presentations were of high quality." The other language leaders said that "Everyone had insightful opinions and it was enjoyable" and "They were all interesting and knew their topics extensively." It is clear that both the EFL students and the language leaders had a very positive impression of each other.

Positive Aspects of the Special Sessions

In response to a question about the positive aspects of the special sessions, one EFL student said that "It was a good opportunity to talk with international students." Another one commented that "This was an

opportunity to interact with many people I have never met before. It was good training for me to speak English with people I don't know." Most of them commented along the lines of "We became pretty good friends." All the EFL students really enjoyed the interaction with each language leader, and one commented that "I enjoyed the project very much! I could talk a lot and learn a lot!"

One of the EFL students said,

I went to a high school affiliated with University A, so I participated in the language exchange center three times because it was an assignment. However, I was the only high school student in the group and the others were all university students, so I was so nervous that I could not talk at all and ate my lunch the whole time. Because of this memory, I never used the language exchange center at the university. I had a lot of fun interacting with language leaders this time, and I wish I had used the center more since my first year of university.

Using the language exchange center through classes is a great way to let university students know about it. It would be important for students to participate in the class if they had the same previous experience of not being able to talk much in the center. It is easier for students to talk with classmates than with people they meet for the first time. Furthermore, since the content of the discussion is taught in the class, students can easily understand and talk about the content in the language exchange center.

In response to the same question, "Please write the good points of the special sessions," one of the language leaders responded, "Friendly environment, easy to talk, students are all intelligent and extremely thoughtful in presentations and discussion," "The special sessions removed the teacher and student dynamics," and "It broadens others' perspective." The special session was a great opportunity for the students to make new friends, learn about each other's cultures and values, and to gain new perspectives.

How to Improve the Special Sessions

The Setting

An EFL student commented, “I would like the language exchange center to be quieter. That way, I can hear the leader and my friends more clearly.” Another one said, “I think the time in the language exchange center is enough. I think it would be more convenient if the center were not so noisy.” Therefore, they could hear the voices of people involved in the session next to them and could not hear the language leader or group members well. In an interview, one of the EFL students said that the people around her were so loud that she got tired of asking the language leader and members to repeat what they had said, so she said nothing even if she sometimes could not hear them. Japanese students tend to hesitate in repeating what they have said, and it is also difficult to hear in a foreign language; therefore, it would be better if the session could be conducted in a quieter place within the language exchange center.

A language leader commented, “It was pretty perfect, but the location could be like a class.” It seems that both EFL students and language leaders were thinking it would be better to meet in a classroom or a similar place where they can hear each other well.

Time

Many international students had Japanese language classes during the third period, so it was regrettable that they could not attend the academic presentation skills class, which was also scheduled for the third period. Consequently, all the EFL students went to the language exchange center during their lunch break, and since the academic presentation skills class was next, the class was delayed by 30 minutes so the students could eat lunch. Many of them commented that they wished the language leaders had come to class instead of having to use their lunch break.

Discussion

The participants’ questionnaire responses, comments, and interview results show that participating in a special session with familiar class-

mates eases tension and allows students to get to know their classmates and the language leaders. The EFL students gave a very high rating to the interaction with the language leaders. It took time to prepare for the sessions, but the EFL students and language leaders gave each other high marks and commented that they had a great time and learned a lot about other countries.

The results of the study can be used to inform the development of language exchange center special sessions in the future. The researcher proposes the following suggestions for such sessions:

- (1) If there are many students, it would be better to have five or six people per language leader. If the students are at an advanced level, three to four per leader would be preferable.
- (2) This project should be part of the class evaluation so that the students will attend the sessions.
- (3) If the session is conducted in the language exchange center, interruptions from neighboring sessions should be avoided.
- (4) It is important to hold a meeting with the language leaders beforehand to explain the content of the class and discussion during the session.
- (5) The topics of the special sessions should preferably be in line with the course content, but it is desirable to start with superficial cultural topics and gradually move on to deeper cultural topics.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the language exchange center and the English course was very effective and beneficial for the EFL students and the language leaders. This project motivated the EFL students to speak in English, which was the course objective, and increased their awareness of not only their own culture but also those of their counterparts.

The EFL students asked each other many questions. Thus, this collaborative project increased awareness, curiosity, and critical thinking. Overall, they reported that they enjoyed talking and hearing about the cultures of others.

This study has a limitation in that seven EFL students participated,

although the language exchange center usually limits the number of students to six. This likely resulted in a decreased amount of speaking time for each participant. Therefore, future studies should involve a smaller group to facilitate the participants' increased interaction among themselves and with the language leaders.

Conducting and implementing a successful collaboration project requires a massive collaborative effort between the manager of the language exchange center, language leaders, and teacher. The sessions in this study were meaningful not only for the EFL students, but also for the language leaders. The collaborative project increased the number of opportunities to incorporate diverse learning content and may motivate students and international students to learn about other cultures as well as their own. It is hoped that future research involves more in-depth planning with the language leaders and more time for sessions.

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