

Further Student Perceptions of Online Intercultural Collaborations in the IVEProject

Edo Forsythe^{1*}

¹Hirosaki Gakuin University, Japan

*Corresponding author's email: edosan@gol.com

*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4547-423X>

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study explored student perceptions of participating in online intercultural collaborations to confirm existing research in this field. English-major students at a Japanese private university participated in the IVEProject online intercultural collaboration project in their third year of study. A total of 59 participants in two cohorts recorded their impressions of the online collaborations after a semester-long project. This paper reports on the qualitative findings of participants' spoken reflections of the IVEProject. This study used grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to code and analyze the participants' responses to identify overall perceptions of the effectiveness of online collaborations as well as what the students shared and learned about other cultures. The data revealed positive attitudes toward online intercultural collaborations and perceived improvements in participants' language skills—they learned new slang and other vocabulary—as well as a greater understanding of cultural similarities and differences among the participants in the IVEProject, specifically in the areas of food culture, music genres, festivals, and holiday practices. The students' perspectives generally demonstrated that online intercultural collaborations such as the IVEProject provide an excellent opportunity for language learners to expand their linguistic and cultural horizons without traveling abroad.

Introduction

Language teachers have taken advantage of the opportunities for intercultural exchange afforded to them by the development of the internet and collaboration technologies for decades, using email-based pen pal exchanges, live video chats, and web-based asynchronous written exchanges, to name a few. O'Dowd (2016) highlighted the increasing role that online intercultural exchanges (OIE) have been playing in foreign language classes as technology has developed to enable learners to collaborate with those in other countries with ease. Lawrence (2013) stated that OIEs are “rich opportunities to build language acquisition [and] intercultural knowledge, develop meaningful relationships and build curiosity to extend intercultural and language learning beyond the class, and opportunities to build 21st-century communications skills” (slide 20). This author has included online intercultural collaborations in English as a

foreign language (EFL) class for over a decade (see Forsythe, 2014) and currently incorporates participation in the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject; <https://iveproject.org>) as a platform for enabling learners to interact with other English learners to improve their language, intercultural communication skills, and cultural awareness. Hagley and Cotter (2019) and Bissett (2021) investigated their students' perceptions of the IVEProject and found that participants thought the project was beneficial to learning English, generated interest in other countries, and had positive aspects, such as intercultural understanding and linguistic improvement. However, more recent research had not explored student perceptions of participating in the IVEProject as part of their EFL classwork and whether they found it to be a worthwhile endeavor. Therefore, the author collected the participants' spoken comments about their participation in the IVEProject and analyzed their responses to better understand the students' perceptions of online intercultural collaborations. This paper reports on the qualitative data from a second cohort of participants collected after the spring semester of 2024 (original data were reported in Forsythe, 2024).

The IVEProject was begun in 2015 using a Kaken grant from the Japanese government and provides a platform for English learners to interact primarily asynchronously via text and other media shared on a dedicated website (IVEProject FAQ). Hagley (2016) provides a detailed background of the IVEProject. Participant interactions are related to quite a wide variety of topics, including but not limited to cultural questions, fashion, festivals, food, free-time activities, games, homes and hometowns, movies and TV, music, school life, sports, travel, or any other topic a participant is interested in discussing. Participants could post an original comment about a topic and then interact with those who respond to their post, or they could begin a conversation with another participant by replying to their posted comment. Participants were encouraged to try to continue communicating with a small number of others across a longer time frame, thereby hopefully leading to more in-depth communications, rather than making shorter comments on a large number of others' posts. Posts could include images, videos, music, or links to other multimedia content that the learners wanted to share, and participants were told that doing so might make their posts more engaging. Having included IVEProject participation in classroom activities for three years, the author considered it important to investigate how the participants felt about joining the IVEProject as part of their EFL studies and what topics the students preferred to discuss with other language learners.

Literature review

The IVEProject

While virtual exchanges have taken many forms in a variety of situations around the world, this review of the literature will focus primarily on those conducted with Japanese participants to ensure a comparison of like sample populations. An extensive list of publications pertaining to the IVEProject in a variety of settings and with various foci can be found on the Research on the IVEProject page of the IVEProject.org website.

Hagley (2016) has reported extensively on the IVEProject from its inception, and Hagley and Cotter (2019) jointly investigated their students' perceptions of the IVEProject. Using a post-project questionnaire, Hagley and Cotter found that participants thought the project was beneficial to learning English (p. 165), generated interest in other countries, and had positive aspects, such as intercultural understanding and linguistic improvement. Due to this successful feedback, Hagley and Cotter supported the incorporation of virtual exchanges in all EFL classrooms.

Bissett (2020) explored students' perceptions of participating in the IVEProject using post-project interviews and found that most of the comments showed a developed interest in other cultures and a willingness to improve their English skills. The participants' confidence in communicating in English also increased through the IVEProject – a finding that was also reported in Hagley (2020). Bissett found that the IVEProject was “a great way to motivate students to become more aware of their own culture while learning about others’, too” (p. 46).

Post-project interviews conducted by Donnery (2022) found that participants reflected more deeply on topics that were relevant to their current lives and future existence, and that virtual exchanges like the IVEProject helped students to overcome negative language learning experiences of the past. Additionally, Donnery's data showed that learners developed their experience with intercultural communication competencies.

Matsumoto (2024) used a mixed-methods approach to investigate participants' areas of development after participating in the IVEProject and found that students significantly improved their cultural knowledge and cognitive cultural intelligence. Additionally, participants stated most commonly that their intercultural and communicative knowledge developed from the project activities, specifically highlighting a feeling that they could communicate more freely and expressively in English than in their native language. Finally, Matsumoto concluded that “it is evident that virtual exchange plays a role in fostering students' intercultural competence” (p. 23).

Finally, Remmerswaal (2023) also explored students' perspectives of participating in the IVEProject and found that they responded to a questionnaire with overwhelmingly positive comments about enjoying the experience. Students reported that they felt their English writing fluency improved, as well as their grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Remmerswaal concluded from the data that writing exchanges with students from around the world were beneficial for most, if not all, EFL students.

Other Virtual Exchanges

Ottoson (2021) reported on the student perspectives of participating in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project between EFL students in Japan and China. Post-COIL questionnaire data revealed that participants developed in three areas: their intercultural attitudes, their understanding of the importance of communication skills, and in personal ICT and research skills. These findings align with those investigating IVEProject collaboration perceptions, so it could be surmised that the format is not as important as the fact of doing the online intercultural collaborations.

Reviewing the literature about virtual exchanges in an EFL learning environment has revealed

some common themes: participants improved their English language skills (Bissett, 2020; Hagley & Cotter, 2019; Matsumoto, 2024; Remmerswaal, 2023), and their intercultural communications competence and cultural awareness developed (Donnery, 2022; Hagley & Cotter, 2019; Ottoson, 2021; Remmerswaal, 2023). Finally, all of the literature reviewed showed that the vast majority of participants enjoyed the IVEProject and found it a beneficial endeavor. However, none of the recent studies about online intercultural collaborations have explored the participants' preferred topics of discussion. This study seeks to confirm the trends of positive opinions in the literature and to further explore students' perceptions of participating in online intercultural collaborations as well as to address the gap in the literature regarding preferred topics of discussion among EFL learners in online fora such as the IVEProject.

Research Questions

The research questions that drove this study are:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of the project participants on the IVEProject after having completed the online intercultural collaboration?

RQ2. What topics were participants most commonly discussing in the IVEProject?

Methods

Participants

The participants were 59 English majors in their third year at a Japanese private university in northern Japan were assigned to participate in the IVEProject as part of their graded activities in a required English language course. While no formal assessment of the participants' English level was conducted, the author would rate them as being at the CEFR A2–B1 level based on their interactions in the classroom. No demographic data was collected from the participants as part of this study.

This study was designed to explore how students perceive their participation in an online intercultural collaboration as part of their EFL studies. Building on existing qualitative studies into the IVEProject's efficacy (Bissett, 2020; Donnery, 2022; Matsumoto, 2024; Remmerswaal, 2023), this study was designed to collect qualitative data about participants' perceptions of their experience and participation in the online intercultural collaboration by having students record themselves answering questions about their experience. The data reported on in this study were from two cohorts of students who participated in the IVEProject for one 8-week iteration—the cohorts will be identified by the year they participated in: 2023 and 2024. The students were assigned to post comments or replies to the IVEProject site over the course of the eight-week project term, and participation grades were based on the number of posts/replies, the total number of words written, and the level of engagement (as set by the metrics on the IVEProject website). Participation in the IVEProject was 15% of the participants' final grades for the semester.

The author's goals for the project were to provide opportunities for the participants to interact with other English language learners in their target language, to have opportunities to practice English in authentic situations, and to enable discussions of cultural topics. To encourage deeper

interactions, it was suggested that the students post on the project website three times per week, with each post to be approximately 100 words in length. The students were encouraged to conduct longer-term discussions with a few partners instead of a wide variety of posts with numerous other participants so that the engagements could achieve a more substantial level of communication. The students were graded on their progress toward achieving these goals.

Informed consent was obtained at the beginning and end of the study by the author, explaining that the participants' audio recordings would be used for research purposes, and the participants were given the opportunity to opt out of their audio being used in the research study, but none of the participants opted out.

Data Collection

After completing eight weeks of participation in the IVEProject during their second semester, the participants were assigned an examination in which they recorded themselves telling about their experience with the IVEProject. They were asked to discuss the following:

- Favorite discussion topics
- Discussion topics they did not like [the 2024 cohort was not asked this question]
- What they learned about other cultures
- What they shared about Japanese culture
- Whether they liked or disliked participating in the IVEProject and why

The examination assessed the students' speaking fluency, vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and content completeness; the students' opinions about the IVE Project were not considered in the assessment criteria. The analysis of the participant recordings was done after the course had finished and the grades had been assigned and submitted.

The audio and video recordings were transcribed using OpenAI's (2022) Whisper automatic speech recognition technology and the output transcripts were randomly double-checked by the researcher (approximately 20% of the transcripts were double-checked by the author to ensure transcription accuracy and only a few minor corrections were necessary, so the researcher considered the transcripts to be reliably accurate for this study). The participants' transcript comments were coded by the author to find common themes using grounded theory data analysis methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify emerging themes in the qualitative response data. The results of the grounded theory analysis are detailed below.

Results

The coding of the comments was organized by questions being responded to (see the exam assignment above) and will be elaborated on separately below. The quotations of student comments are presented as they were spoken, so the linguistic errors in the comments below are presented as they were in the original text and are not flagged as being "[sic]" as would normally be expected in citations.

Participants' Overall Perceptions

First, the results will be discussed in response to Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of the project participants on the IVEProject after having completed the online intercultural collaboration? The overall perception of the participants in the IVEProject was positive. Among the 2023 cohort respondents, 64% (17 out of 28) and 87% (27 out of 31) of the 2024 cohort participants reported that they liked or enjoyed participating in the project. In both cohorts, positive comments explained that the project was a way to improve English skills and to learn about other countries. Four of the 2023 cohort participants and four 2024 cohort participants gave negative or qualified responses about their feelings toward the IVEProject. The most common reason for not liking the online intercultural collaboration was due to system problems that made the collaborations a little difficult to conduct. Also, three of the 2024 participants stated that it was sometimes difficult to find non-Japanese participants to interact with, probably because of the 60-40 split of Japan-based and non-Japan-based active participants in this iteration of the IVEProject. Therefore, the participants' perceptions of the IVEProject being included in their EFL studies can be said to be generally positive and productive.

Favorite and Least Favorite Topics

The online collaboration discussion topic choices will be explored in response to Research Question 2: What topics were participants most commonly discussing in the IVEProject? The favorite topics of the participants in the 2023 cohort (n=28) of discussion in the IVEProject ranked as follows, with the number of responses in parentheses:

1. Food (7)
2. Sports (soccer, tennis, basketball, baseball) (5)
3. Music (4)
4. Festivals (3)
5. Travel (3)

The comments that accompanied the discussions of participants' favorite topics also shed some light on the cultural knowledge they gained from their interactions: "I found out that matcha is one of the most popular flavors in the world," and "My favorite topic is about stinky tofu, which was taught to me by a Taiwan person. I didn't know about stinky tofu, so I wanted to try it when I went to Taiwan."

The most common favorite discussion topics of the 2024 cohort (n=31) were:

1. Food (14)
2. Music (4)
3. Festivals (3)
4. Anime / manga (3)

Three times as many participants mentioned that food topics were their favorites than any other topic. The participants commonly noted that they learned about Colombian and Mexican food

cultures and that they had not known anything about these cultures prior to participating in the IVEProject.

Due to the fact that participants could choose the topics they chose to discuss, the 2024 cohort was not asked about their least favorite topics. In the 2023 cohort, there were few comments about participants' least favorite topics (and several students did not respond to the question), but two common themes emerged from the data. Self-introductions was mentioned three times, and the topics of games, sports, and fashion had equal numbers of mentions with two each. The lack of comments about topics that the participants did not enjoy is mainly due to the fact that they could choose whatever topic they wanted to discuss, and the only required discussion topic was the self-introduction at the beginning of the IVEProject. One cohort 2023 participant explained this well: "There wasn't a topic I didn't like. I only chose a topic that I liked."

Learning About and Sharing Culture

The participants were asked to discuss what they learned about other cultures through the IVEProject. The October–December 2023 cohort's iteration of the project had over 3,274 active participants from 12 countries (E. Hagley, personal communication, June 30, 2024), so there were plenty of opportunities for participants to learn about and share cultural information. The participants mentioned learning about the following foreign cultural topics:

1. Food in Taiwan, Colombia, Mexico (6)
2. Popular sports (2)
3. Music (2)
4. Festivals (2)

The May–June 2024 cohort's iteration of the project had over 4,911 active participants from 15 countries, providing even more opportunities for participants to learn about and share cultural information. The participants mentioned learning about the following foreign cultural topics:

1. Food (12)
2. Anime / manga (5)
3. Music (4)
4. Festivals (4)

Considering that food was the most favored topic of discussion, it is not surprising that most comments about what participants learned about other cultures through the IVEProject discussions pertained to food. Participants also mentioned sharing information about what music was popular in their countries. Because the 2023 cohort's iteration of the IVEProject was held in the fall, participants naturally discussed Christmas traditions and events and how they differ. One student remarked, "I realized that in other countries people don't spend Christmas with their friends or boyfriends but with their own families." However, the 2024 cohort did not mention discussing the holidays in their comments.

Exploring food cultures allowed the participants to find similarities and differences across cultures. In both cohorts, the participants shared information about their hometown's specialties

they are proud of: “I shared about my hometown, Odate, in Akita. My hometown specialties are Hinai chicken and Odate Magewappa.” (2023 cohort participant). The wide variety of discussion topics mentioned in the response data regarding the sharing of cultural topics demonstrates that the IVEProject was truly a source of intercultural education for its participants.

Research Outcomes

There were four research outcomes identified through the grounded theory coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of the participant response data from both cohorts. These outcomes identify areas where the students stated that they benefited from participating in the IVEProject. The first area was language improvement. The students reported learning new slang and new words, as well as seeing the project as a good chance to practice English communication skills. The second area of improvement was in understanding cultural similarities and differences. The students learned about the comparability of music genres of various countries, holiday celebration traditions, and food culture habits. The third area identified by the participants was personal development. The students learned more about their own Japanese culture through explaining it to others in English. They also developed their personal communication skills so that they could make themselves understood in English to other English language learners. The final area of growth from the project was in the students’ global perspective. The students gained a better understanding of the interconnectedness of the global society—one example being that students learned that sports fans share the same ideas and feelings the world over. Considering these four areas of growth that the participants identified as being gained through participation in the IVEProject, the overall success of the project can be clearly estimated.

Discussion

The findings of this study generally align with previous research into students’ perceptions of participating in online intercultural collaborations like the IVEProject. Looking at the overall outcomes of the data analysis, this study’s participants experienced similar growth in the areas of intercultural development, communicative skills, and personal growth as did participants in studies by Bissett (2020), Hagley and Cotter (2019), Ottoson (2021), and Remmerswaal (2023). Participants’ understanding of cultural similarities and differences grew as well – for example, by learning that even though many different cultures celebrate the same holiday, the way of celebrating is different. These developments in cultural understanding were also seen in Hagley and Cotter (2019), Matsumoto (2024), and Remmerswaal (2023).

Improvement in English language skills and communication confidence was also realized by the participants of this study. They cited learning more slang and natural communication styles, as well as feeling better about their ability to communicate in English. This aligns with the linguistic and communication skill developments seen in Donnery (2022), Hagley and Cotter (2019), Ottoson (2021), and Remmerswaal (2023). This study adds to the growing evidence of the positive impact that online intercultural collaborations are having in the field of foreign language education.

Further, this study adds to existing literature by identifying the preferred discussion topics of

participants in online intercultural exchanges, namely, food, music, and cultural festivals. Previous research did not specifically report on the participants' topic selections, so this study has helped to fill a gap in the knowledge about conducting such intercultural collaborations. Language educators who hope to include such activities in their educational practices can use these topics as suggestions for launching students into meaningful collaborative discussions. This study's findings demonstrate that online intercultural collaborations such as the IVEProject should be included in language learning programs to develop not only language skills and communication abilities but also broaden and deepen intercultural knowledge among the participants.

Conclusion

This study was a qualitative investigation of Japanese university students' perceptions of participating in an online intercultural collaboration – the International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEProject) – in their EFL class. The participants were asked to record their answers to questions about their participation and feelings about the project. The audio recording data were transcribed and analyzed to find common themes using grounded theory data analysis methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The data in this study adds to the existing literature of intercultural collaborations by showing that participants in the project enjoyed discussing topics that were commonly used in EFL classroom discussions: food, sports, music, and cultural topics. The students also shared information about Japanese aspects of these topics with learners in other countries. The overall outcomes gleaned from the data revealed that students developed their English language communication skills by learning new slang and vocabulary, as well as improving their English communication competence. Participants also improved their understanding of similarities and differences among cultures, making them feel like they were part of a shared global community. Finally, the data showed that the students experienced personal development in that they learned more about their own Japanese culture and improved their interpersonal communication skills. These findings align very closely with those seen in other research into participant perceptions of virtual exchanges (see Bissett, 2020; Donnery, 2022; Forsythe, 2014; Hagley, 2016, 2020; Hagley & Cotter, 2019; Matsumoto, 2024; Ottoson, 2021; Remmerswaal, 2023).

Online intercultural collaborations have been a part of foreign language education for years and have proved to be a successful way to not only improve learners' language skills but also broaden their understanding of other cultures. This study adds to the growing research in the field and supports the incorporation of online intercultural collaborations in all language learning environments.

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Biodata

Dr. Edo Forsythe is the head of the Department of English Language and Literature at Hirosaki Gakuin University and a researcher in the field of educational technology in foreign language education. His research has focused on mobile technology integration into the Japanese EFL classroom, and he has published and presented extensively in the field. Dr. Forsythe's recent research has focused on the efficacy of online intercultural collaborations as well as on the benefits of using free writing activities in the classroom.