Virtual exchange experience:
International collaboration for language learning during the pandemic

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Abstract: The Virtual Exchange between Japanese learners in a Hawaii college and English learners in an Okinawan university showcases the potential of collaborative online projects during and beyond the pandemic, when opportunities to travel or study abroad are greatly reduced. This session presents the instructors' engaged guidance to implement Virtual Exchange experiences where students created bilingual videos and provided bilingual feedback to each other. Technology tools used included PowerPoint, Google Drive and tools, YouTube, and Zoom. During this presentation, our design of the project, ideas for relationship building, presentation tips, challenges, implications, and sample guidelines will be shared with audience.

1. Introduction

An intermediate-level Japanese class from a Hawaii college and an English pedagogy class from an Okinawan university collaborated to incorporate virtual exchange into their respective curriculum for two years. Now with travel restrictions due to the pandemic looming over us and opportunities to physically visit another country greatly reduced, the online class is becoming the standard (New Normal), which has increased the viability of international virtual exchanges. This session presents our Virtual Exchange experience through the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) process focusing on the instructor's involvement for increased engagement that provided our students with an authentic setting, which enhanced their motivation to practice their L2 and to learn from each other.

2. Project Implementation

2.1 Project Design

The project was designed with conservatively doable activities (i.e., self-introduction, video creation, peer feedback) considering development of a sense of community among learners within the limited time frame derived from the term differences between the two institutions (See Table 2 below for details). The time differences between Hawaii and Japan led us to employ asynchronous virtual exchange. The instructors first learned about each other's backgrounds regarding the nature of the courses (e.g., language skill course, pedagogy) and the majors of their prospected students and found development of their

respective L2 and learning new information through presentations (authentic use of L2) as common benefits. To make the exchange motivationally meaningful and manageable for both sides, a flexible approach was adopted to maximize the opportunities for students to use their L2 in building a risk-free community that facilitated students' willingness to present and to provide feedback to each other.

2.2 Participants

The students in Okinawa are in their third- and fourth-years at the university and possessed advanced English skills, as their majors were in the English language or in International Studies while students in Hawaii are novice high-to-low intermediate level (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012) learners of Japanese although they are mostly junior or senior students at a 4-year institution with various majors.

2.3 Technology Tools

Technology tools used included PowerPoint for presentation slide and video creation, students' individual cell phones for self-introduction video creation and recording narration, Google Drive to share collected information, Google Sheets to list participants' topics and links to their uploaded videos, Google Forms to provide peer feedback, YouTube to upload videos, Zoom, Microsoft (MS) Teams, and Skype for online communication. While the Hawaii side used Zoom for regular operation of class sessions as the class delivery method was switched to online during the pandemic, Okinawan students used a hybrid class that combined face-to-face and MS Teams even during the pandemic. Skype was used once for the instructor's initial meeting before starting the project. For students, we provided tutorials (e.g., YouTube videos) for learning how to convert PowerPoint slides into a video (MP4), which most students were not familiar with while almost all the students were aware of how to create slides using PowerPoint. The choice of video-recording devices was left to up to the students to decide on the Okinawan side.

2.3 Guidelines

Instructors' active involvement in the project was the key to a successful implementation (Maeda and Rosen, 2020). We developed guidelines that included a timeline with detailed procedures. See part of the guidelines below (Table 1.) We provided scaffolding to their L2 language and logistics such as topic selections, resources for their research, file naming, optimal size range of their files, up through script writing and narration recording. All of these will be valuable skills for their future in living the New Normal beyond the language skills they acquired (Tohsaku, 2021). For the students learning Japanese, topics of presentation were selected from the sample topics each of the instructors had presented to them and the topics eventually selected aligned perfectly with the project purpose--to learn each other's culture, lifestyle, social issues, etc. living in the larger community of the Pacific as islanders. To facilitate students' brainstorming possible topics and to start working, they were required to submit a proposal, which was to be approved by their instructor. When the time was ready for the exchange, we then also

paired-up students to have them view their partners' videos and to provide comments instead of watching all the videos in class due to the time constraint. To do this, the instructors provided links to partners' videos by email or on a shared spreadsheet (Google Drive) students had access to.

Table 1. Guidelines

Guidelines (Created for Hawaii students and partially adopted by Okinawa students)	
Topic selection	Hawaii students are recommended to introduce local tourist spots (or secret spots), everyday social topics (student life in Hawaii/USA), social/environmental issues, local language (e.g., Pidgin), Hawaiian language, culture or Hawaii in general, etc. considering the partners being in Okinawa, Japan.
L2 expressions	For the Japanese language use, design your presentation using the structures and vocabulary learned thus far as opposed to heavily relying on translation tools online (e.g., Google translation).
Timeline and work process	Follow the timeline (due dates) for 1) Topic selection, 2) Research, 3) Resource (graphics) collections and script writing, 4) Slides making, 5) Self-introduction video creation, 6) Slide revisions and practice, 7) Uploading slide draft and further revisions by considering feedback from the instructor/peers, 8) Recording narration and finalizing video for rehearsals, 9) Video viewing (presentation), 10) Portfolio making, 11) Peer feedback, and 12) Portfolio submission.
File name	When uploading slides/video, save your products by clearly indicating your LAST NAME and submit them into the correct location.
File size	Save/export your file (MP4) by selecting "Low Quality" or "Internet Quality" to keep the size smaller and easier to upload to YouTube.
Punctuality	You don't have to make everything perfect. Submitting a "B" grade product on time is more appreciated than a late "A" grade product.

2.4 Timeline

Accounting for term differences, the activities adopted were flexibly selected to maximize students' engagement. As seen in Table 2 (below), the two institutions' terms are different with regards to the beginning and ending months. Overlapping time also differed from semester to semester. Whereas Hawaii students were able to work on the project for the whole semester, Okinawa students had a limited time to participate. For the fall semester (in yellow), Okinawa students had approximately 9 weeks for the project, which still allowed sufficient time for them to participate in the exchange activities by creating a self-introduction and "show and tell" video in addition to providing comments to partner students' presentation videos. For the spring semester (in green), however, Okinawa students barely had a month to participate as they had just started the new school year/term when Hawaii students were finishing up the semester in a month or so.

Table 2: Project Timeline

Timeline/Month	Hawaii	Okinawa
August	Fall Semester begins	Break
	Project introduction	
September	Research	Break
		Second Semester begins
October	Self-introduction video creation	Project introduction
	Slide creation	Self-introduction video creation
November	Rehearsals and presentation	Video-viewing and feedback, combined with "show & tell" (Google Forms and video)
	Feedback to Okinawa (Google Forms and video)	
	Thanksgiving Holiday	
December	Peer feedback (internal)	
	Final Exams/Semester ends	
	Winter Break	Winter Break
January	Spring Semester begins	---
	Project Introduction/Proposal due	
February	Research	Final Exams/Second Semester ends
	Script writing	Spring Break
March	Slide creation	Spring Break
	Self-Introduction video creation	
	Spring Break	
April	Rehearsals/slides editing (Instructor provides feedback)	First Semester begins
	Self-introduction video to share with Okinawa partners	Project Introduction
	Presentation video viewing/Peer feedback (internal)/Portfolio creation	Video-viewing/Self-introduction/ Feedback video creation
May	Portfolio submission	---
	Receive feedback from Okinawa partners	
	Final Exams/Semester ends	---

2.5 Relationship Building

To make the virtual exchange engaging, we had students first create a bilingual self-introduction video to learn about each other, which would then bring the virtual experience a little closer to an ordinary setting. As scaffolding, we created a sample video and instructed to briefly talk about student's own name, major, and things they like (to do) so that the students will be able to relate to each other based on a common ground found.

2.6 Presentation Tips

Students were provided a rubric for video preparations, which was applicable to the Hawaii's class project. The rubric had criterion not limited only to language use, such as accuracy and variety of vocabulary and grammar, intonation and pronunciation, fluency, delivery (eye contact), but it also required visually appealing slides (to include both text and graphics), all of which were recommended to be used when students provided feedback to each other. Later, we added attire (professional casual) to the rubric. With a situation in which recordings usually took place at home, we noticed that students'

attire occasionally would be too casual and not appropriate for a video recording from the instructor's conservative perspectives even if viewers were limited to the project participants. In addition, limiting distraction from outside noises while recording was advised. Living in a big city like Honolulu where urban setting is combined with wildlife nearby, the students' videos often caught noises from roosters and even picked up construction and street noises in their neighborhood. It should be also noted that, for Okinawa students, casual self-introduction videos created by Hawaii's counterparts were rather fascinating as they reflected the "real-life" cultural difference.

2.7 Challenges

Challenges we have encountered are related to the balance of engagement. The current timeline restricts participation of one group while the other group has the full semester for the project. A very small number of students felt or may have felt participation unbalanced. The more students dedicated their time and energy to the project, the higher their expectation towards "the exchange" became. Another challenge was the difficulty for some students--non-traditional students in particular--to find the time to participate because of the weighting of the exchange. The instructors may need to consistently reinforce the fact that the backgrounds of students and the partner students will almost always be different; however, each side should be patient and understanding of the process and each student should try to do their best to maximize their efforts during the exchange because one takeaway experience is to acknowledge and address the challenges of a virtual exchange process, which would still require the same type of schedule coordination, documentation requirements, timing, feedback, and commitment even if done by students in a single academic institution in the same location. In short, virtual exchange of ideas requires focus.

3. Implications and Conclusion

The success of the international virtual exchange project required great involvement of the instructors who were willing to learn and use technology tools in addition to planning and organizing students' work, not to mention addressing students' social and cognitive engagement with the content. We believe that language instructors can incorporate a highly engaged community project work into their curriculum as the level of the instructors' technology skills improve. It was serendipitous that we started this virtual exchange project just before the pandemic and with the situation where the online exchange is now becoming a new standard, both students and instructors found the project very meaningful. In living the New Normal, it is the instructors' responsibility to train students beyond L2 so that they will greatly benefit for future with their communication and technology skills they acquire though an international virtual project.

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