

Online Conversation Project Between Universities in Japan and the US: Its Rationale and Design for Integrating Research and Pedagogy

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(Received on May 24, 2021)

Abstract

This study⁴ examines an online conversation project between universities in Japan and the US during a pandemic-affected semester. From a pedagogical perspective, the project was inspired by online intercultural exchange (O'Dowd, 2016). In principle, it was a practitioner-driven effort toward internationalization at home (Beelen & Jones, 2015) to facilitate intercultural contact experiences for students. From the perspective of research, the project analyzed Japanese as a lingua franca in virtual interactions in light of the local learner corpus approach (Seidlhofer, 2002). This study presents the project's rationale and design and reviews relevant literature and essential terminology. Although small-scale, this type of exchange project proved promising as an internationalization effort and in local corpus research and pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The year 2020 redirected language practitioners' and researchers' attention to information and communications technology (ICT) more intensely and urgently than ever in the history of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which dates back to the 1960s. The international "physical" immobility owing to the COVID-19 pandemic enormously challenges the stakeholders of international education. This is because it threatens the internationalization of higher education (IoHE). The pre-pandemic recent decades, however, produced many significant works in these two areas that are relevant and applicable to the changed and changing circumstances as well as the current educational landscape.

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4 JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP20K00717 supports this study.

In his 2004 work, Warschauer listed 10 current and future ICT developments and the consequent CALL changes. Affordable computers, faster and stable wireless internet connections, audio-visual communication, and digital native students have already presented themselves. These advancements enable us to introduce into a formal or informal curriculum what O'Dowd (2016) termed "online intercultural exchange (OIE)." OIE has its conceptual base in internationalization at home (IaH), which was introduced initially in the European context (Beelen, 2017) and is encompassed by the internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) holistically discussed by Leask (2015). Undeniably, OIE currently receives considerable attention at the intersection of a rapidly shifting ICT landscape and an immediate need to restructure internationalization at this crucial juncture for higher education.

This study's purpose is twofold. First, it describes the online conversation project inspired by OIE in principle and informed by a *mélange* of theoretical and conceptual underpinnings and technological and methodological practices. At the core lies the Language Management Theory (LMT) in intercultural contact situations, developed by J. V. Neustupný and B. H. Jernudd. The project aimed at providing remote "virtual" contact situations by utilizing cutting-edge online meetings and community platforms. This was to promote authentic interactions in a meaningful fashion among university students in geographically dispersed locations in Japan and the US. Second, the study intends to serve as a comprehensive interdisciplinary review of the relevant literature in language and international education and technology while positioning the current project within a series of similar projects previously conducted by the authors. In the following sections, we will first explain the terminology and its definition while reviewing relevant literature. Subsequently, we will present the project overview.

2. Project Rationale

The project employed an interdisciplinary approach based on its conceptual, theoretical, and pedagogical grounds broadly across various disciplines in the subareas of language education. This section introduces some terminologies used in the relevant literature by which the project was scholarly motivated and on which it was theoretically based.

2.1 Internationalization of Higher Education

The global landscape for the internationalization of higher education has changed dramatically. The quest for fostering global competency focuses on the internationalization of higher education (IoHE). IoHE has been extensively studied in the European context (de Wit *et al.*, 2015; Coelen *et al.*, 2017). However, it is also of paramount importance in the Asian context. Knight (2004, 2008) defined IoHE as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education” and presented two pillars of its possible strategies and activities: (1) internationalization at home and (2) internationalization abroad, sometimes dubbed as education abroad or cross-border education. International student recruitment and mobility have long been the primary manifestations of these two scaffolding pillars of IoHE. However, international students’ on-campus presence itself does not automatically constitute IaH, as Leask (2015) pointed out.

The concept of IaH is broad. It was defined by Beelen and Jones (2015) as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (p. 69).” As a similar concept to IaH, Leask (2015) presented the internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) as “the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study (p. 9).” With no mention of “domestic learning environments” in the definition, IoC can entail cross-border mobility as part of the curriculum (e.g., overseas programs required for course completion). IaH, in contrast, focuses on the non-mobile majority who need to seek the opportunity to benefit from IoC both in the formal and informal curriculum while physically staying at home (Beelen & Jones, 2015: 68).

This project provided a small-scale, informal manifestation of IaH efforts intended for students in the context of higher education in Japan and the US while they remained in their domestic environments.

2.2 Lingua Franca

Lingua franca is an intermediary language used for commerce and trade in its earlier sense. The concept is very different from the role English currently plays in this globalized world (House, 2010). There is an increasing recognition of English as a lingua franca

(ELF) within foreign language education research and pedagogy. This is due to the increasing number of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners worldwide, that is, the rapid growth and diversification of Kachru's (1982) "expanding circle." The widely accepted definition of ELF is "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice and often the only option (Seidlhofer, 2011: 7)."

Evident from an ELF analogy, in principle, in a different context, Japanese as a lingua franca (JLF) is also a promising research area. Second language (L2) speakers of Japanese in multicultural communities inside Japan have rapidly expanded in their population and diversity. Japanese learners overseas are an established body at secondary and higher education levels, primarily due to the popularity of Japanese subcultures. JLF interaction does happen, although not as globally as ELF, but in specific communities and contexts. In a similar vein, plain Japanese *Yasashii Nihongo* recently emerged as an effort to reduce the communication gap between Japanese citizens and foreign residents, particularly in times of natural disasters as well as in daily social interactions (Iori, 2016). Mutual intelligibility is the prime focus of the concepts of JLF and plain Japanese. For first language (L1) speakers of Japanese, sociolinguistic adjustments and strategies are the key to successful interaction. For L2 speakers, nativelikeness is not a goal to achieve. It should be noted here that we avoided using the conventional terms "native speaker (NS)/non-native speaker (NNS)" in this study. Instead, we employed the "L1 speaker/L2 learner" dyad, even when otherwise used in the literature. In some cases, third language (L3) learners of Japanese were involved in this project, but for simplicity's sake, "L2 learners" will be used to indicate such cases unless it needs to be specified.

This project aimed at enabling both L1 speakers and L2 learners of Japanese to engage in JLF interactions and learn from each other through actual language use and cultural exchange experiences.

2.3 Intercultural Collaborative Learning

As a significant realization of IaH efforts in Japanese universities, the inclusion of intercultural collaborative learning (ICL) courses in the curriculum gained much attention (Iwasaki & Ikeda, 2015; Suematsu, 2017). In its early stage of development, ICL was primarily driven by governmental policies, such as Global 30 and Go Global Japan, initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The

increasing popularity of ICL, both at national and private universities in Japan, has been proven by the number of published papers on ICL topics, as reported by Suematsu (2019a) and by extensive practice reports found in the volume by Suematsu, Akiba, and Yonezawa (2019).

ICL is a designed educational environment wherein domestic and international students benefit from utilizing opportunities to learn by accomplishing given tasks while overcoming any potential linguistic and cultural barriers during authentic communication and meaningful interactions (Sakamoto, Horie & Yonezawa, 2017; Suematsu, 2018, 2019b). Such ICL courses are inherently project-based and pedagogically categorized into two types in Japan: ELF-mediated and JLF-mediated. In JLF-mediated ICL courses, domestic Japanese L1 students expectedly improve their intercultural communicative competence and gain awareness as JLF speakers by interacting in their L1 with students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. International students are provided with opportunities for using actual Japanese language with L1 Japanese speakers and other L2 learners through meaningful interactions within the formal curriculum. ICL practices at Japanese universities are enabled by inbound student mobility. Hence, it is a mobility-driven approach for IaH. However, with the emerging technology, it can be assumed that mobility, whether physical or virtual, will retain the concept and premise of ICL.

This project acts as a virtual version of JLF-mediated ICL courses and a pseudo-ICL experimental venue for intercultural interaction data collection.

2.4 Interactional Competence and Intercultural Competence

The term “competence” has always been the key in the long history of linguistic theory. The use ranges from “linguistic competence” theorized by Chomsky (1965) to “communicative competence” first proposed by Hymes (1972) and later developed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). Additionally, Kramsch (1986) introduced the notion of “interactional competence (IC),” which focuses on the construction of a shared internal context and the collaborative efforts of the interactional partners. IC presupposes intercultural competence, as has been extensively studied in study-abroad settings that present opportunities for intercultural communication (Young, 2019).

The importance of “intercultural (communicative) competence (ICC)” is universally acknowledged, with an ever-growing diversity in the language landscape worldwide. However, the terminology shaped around ICC does not have a consensus; there are differ-

ent definitions, purposes, and uses of the concept, such as “intercultural sensitivity” and “global competence,” which partially or largely overlap. The general definition agreed upon through an extensive Delphi study with a panel of intercultural scholars is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2004: 184, 2006: 247–248).” Similarly, as the result of an extensive review of intercultural literature, Fantini (2007) defined the concept succinctly as “a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (emphasis in original).”

Among the major ICC models, Byram (1997) focused on attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness as the five components necessary to become an interculturally competent speaker of a foreign language. He also configured three locations for acquiring ICC: (1) classroom, (2) fieldwork, and (3) independent learning. He further claimed the limitation of classrooms as “the opportunity to develop the skills of interaction in real time” and the potential of fieldwork outside the classroom (but still under teachers’ guidance) to offer such opportunities with mobility and/or contact, whether real or virtual.

The importance of developing ICC is also mentioned in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) that the Council of Europe put together in 2001 as a guideline used to describe the achievements of foreign language learners (Council of Europe, 2001). CEFR is known for its conceptual base of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. In its companion volume (Council of Europe, 2018, 2020, hereafter CEFR-CV 2018, 2020), the scale for pluricultural competence was newly added with the 23 can-do descriptors. Another significant change made in CEFR-CV 2020 is the scale of online interaction (with subcategories of online conversation and discussion, goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration) introduced with the 43 new descriptors and dealt separately from oral and written interactions due to the multimodality of online interaction. This recent move in the influential framework profoundly impacted this study.

This project investigated how IC and ICC are demonstrated in the JLF interaction and reflected as awareness in the survey and interview results.

2.5 Online Intercultural Exchange

Within the research and practice of CALL, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is an umbrella term that encompasses various forms of communication between individuals or groups, either asynchronous CMC (ACMC) or synchronous CMC (SCMC), through networked computers or portable mobile devices (Yao & Ling, 2020). Since the advent of the Internet in the early 1990s, CMC has replaced face-to-face communication in various aspects of our social and academic lives. In recent years, CMC plays a pivotal role in virtual exchange (VE).

O'Dowd (2018) defined VE as “the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programs and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators (p. 5).” O'Dowd used VE as an umbrella term that covers all approaches with different terms, including telecollaboration and e-tandem. He also highlighted the importance of distinguishing VE from virtual mobility (VM), which refers to students' use of online platforms and tools to take courses of a geographically distant institution. VM contrasts with the traditional sense of physical mobility or studying abroad. On the other hand, Bruhn (2017) proposed using the term virtual internationalization (VI) that encompasses all the strategies under various labels that “make use of ICT to internationalize higher education (p. 6).” Therefore, VI is a broader concept than VM (Bruhn, 2018). VE, VM, and VI appear to share a conceptual base and overlap to a certain extent, but not completely. Whatever term may be used, it is evident that internationalization is no longer limited to physical student mobility for the minority. ICT-supported approaches ensure increased access to internationalization opportunities for all students, including the non-mobile majority.

O'Dowd (2017) categorized VE initiatives and approaches into three types: (1) practitioner-driven (or specific subject), (2) institutionally-led (or syllabus-shared), and (3) outsourced (or service-provider). One typical instance of the second type is collaborative online international learning (COIL) that “involves connecting two or more classes of similar course content in different countries (O'Dowd, 2017: 17)” and “will benefit from the institutional support provided by university management and are likely to receive the funding and training necessary to integrate [VE] on a large scale across an institution (O'Dowd, 2017: 21).” COIL was pioneered at SUNY. The U.S.-Japan COIL initiative administered by the American Council on Education (ACE) is a prime example of this type.

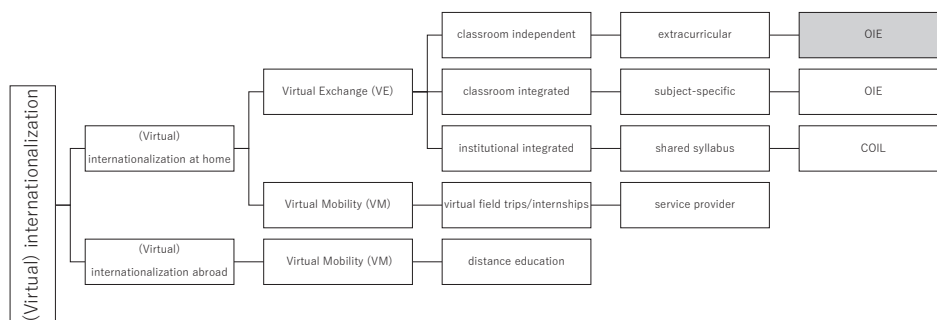


Figure 1. Overview of key terms

Of particular interest to the project is the first type in O’Dowd’s categorization. This VE type is usually “developed by teachers who believe *passionately* in the underlying principles and aims of Virtual Exchange (emphasis added, O’Dowd, 2017: 21).” As an example of this bottom-up practitioner-driven approach, we use the term online intercultural exchange (OIE) in this study. The volume edited by O’Dowd and Lewis (2016) provides an overview of OIE in higher education, reports findings on the impact of OIE, and documents theoretically informed accounts of OIE. In its introduction, O’Dowd and Lewis (2016) described OIE plainly as “the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partner classes from other cultural contexts or geographical locations under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitator.” OIE has been employed as a pedagogical tool in foreign language education and intercultural communication, often using a lingua franca, and has also been an essential tool for developing intercultural awareness for decades in various formats. OIE can be classroom-independent or classroom-integrated.

Figure 1 shows how hierarchical, inclusive (or exclusive), and interrelated terms are, in our view, based on the literature review. It also highlights the current project’s position.

This project explored the effectiveness of a small-scale, practitioner-driven OIE in a classroom-independent fashion from pedagogical, practical, and scholarly perspectives and attempted to assess the pros and cons of its virtuality.

2.6 Language Management Theory and Contact Situations

Language Management Theory (LMT) in intercultural contact situations is an influential framework for researchers in Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) teaching and Japanese

discourse/interaction studies, as comprehensively outlined by Nekvapil and Sherman (2009). LMT analyzes how linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural problems (i.e., derivations from certain norms) are noted and evaluated, and how possible adjustments, if any, are planned and implemented by interacting participants. Language management is a process that varies depending on the situation. Fan (1994) suggested a triad typology of contact situations: (1) partner language contact situations, (2) third-party language contact situations, and (3) cognate language situations (situations of communication in dialects of the same language). Among these, types (1) and (2) are of particular interest to this study.

In Japan's context, partner language contact situations are typically situations with L1 speakers (domestic students) and L2 learners of Japanese (international students from partner universities) or JLF with L1 speaker situations. ICP courses (see Section 2.3) are pedagogically-designed partner language contact situations within a formal curriculum. This type of situation is also possible overseas (i.e., outside of Japan), for example, by inviting exchange students from Japan or local Japanese residents as visitors into JFL classes, which is often dubbed as "visitor sessions (Nishimura & Umeda, 2016)." On the other hand, third-party language contact situations involve L2 Japanese learners with various L1 or are JLF without L1 speaker situations. JFL class situations in Japan and the US are typical examples. In either case of contact situations, there are "various degrees of contactness," as pointed out by Neustupný (2004). The JFL class in Japan usually consists of international students from partner universities worldwide; hence, intercultural contactness is usually more significant than in JFL class situations overseas where students often share the same L1 and sociocultural norms. It is important to note that intercultural contactness in such situations usually becomes accessible with international mobility as a form of internalization (see Section 2.1).

This project aimed at providing intercultural contact with the non-mobile majority in 2020 and examining interactants' behavior in quasi-ICL contact situations within the LMT framework.

2.7 Local Learner Corpus Approach

Finally, we will turn to the corpus linguistics aspect of the project. For researchers in conversation/discourse analysis studies, collecting naturally occurring data, either text or speech, is an indispensable first step. For language teaching practitioners, analyzing

learner corpora is an insightful resource for pedagogical research. Large-scale learner corpora have become available for these purposes in the last few decades. The International Corpus of Japanese as a Second Language (I-JAS) and BTSJ-Japanese Natural Conversation Corpus, both developed at the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL), are two major speech corpora available for Japanese discourse studies. While such large reference corpora can inform language studies and teaching, a local learner corpora approach can address specific issues in a given setting for a particular student population, as Seidlhofer (2002) put forward and Mukherjee and Rohrbach (2006) later endorsed. These works demonstrate how a local learner corpus of students' own writings can be used directly as a resource for teachers and learners in their own EFL classrooms by analyzing their own familiar texts. Along this line, Yamura-Takei, Fujiwara, and Yoshida (2010) presented a collaborative corpus project between Japanese and US universities⁵. By utilizing their own EFL and JFL teaching environments, they collected students' synopsis writings promoted by a short video clip in their L1 and L2 and compiled a comparable corpus with the four subsets of data (English L1 and L2, Japanese L1 and L2). The corpus was analyzed for its discourse coherence and proved helpful in gaining insights that can be brought back to their own EFL/JFL teaching contexts (Yamura-Takei & Yoshida, 2012) and descriptions of grammar (Shimojo, 2015, 2016).

With the same premise in mind, the current project aimed at proving how pedagogically robust and immediately applicable resources a locally compiled and analyzed corpus can be to inform teachers in the local class setting.

2.8 Summary

The key theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings and concepts that inspired the project are presented in the previous seven subsections. This study principally entails a local learner corpus approach to JLF interactions. For this research purpose, intercultural contact situations are provided as an educationally effective and academically stimulating opportunity in an OIE form and a virtual version of ICL in the IaH context. The JLF interactions are analyzed linguistically, sociolinguistically, and socioculturally in the LMT framework while bearing in mind that the relevant concepts of competence are closely interrelated. The findings in the analysis will be employed in the local course design and

5 This project was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP 23520481.

management processes, which is, in nature, the essence of a local learner corpus approach.

3. Project Design

3.1 Purpose

The online conversation project between universities in Japan and the US (*Nichibei daigaku kaiwa purojekuto* in Japanese) was carried out virtually from October through December 2020, a phase heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was made possible by a collaboration of three co-researchers from Hiroshima Shudo University (hereafter, HSU) in Japan, Willamette University (hereafter, WU), and University at Buffalo, The State University of New York (hereafter, UB) in the US. The three universities are not MOU-based partners but are informally connected on a teacher/researcher level. Therefore, the project was a *passionate* practitioner-driven type based on O'Dowd's (2017) VE categories, and it was realized with a solid belief in VE potentials.

The project had a dual purpose of mutual benefits. "Dual" implies that both research and pedagogy are considered. By "mutual," we mean that students in Japan and the US were equally concerned about their benefits. Therefore, the project was carefully designed to include both the research setting where teacher-researchers could obtain authentic spoken interaction data for their studies and the pedagogical benefits that all student participants could obtain to develop their interactional and intercultural competence. This project's primary driving force was the need to offer intercultural contact situations as an IaH effort for non-mobile students both in Japan and the US. Simultaneously, the project enabled teacher-researchers to collect local JLF interaction data that could be later analyzed in the LMT framework and examine the impact on IC development through post-survey and interviews. The choice of JLF over another possibility of ELF was due to our pedagogical focus on (1) raising awareness of HSU students in their first language and culture and (2) providing opportunities for contact situations that UB/WU students seek.

3.2 Participants

The student-participants of this project were voluntarily recruited by three teacher-researchers at each university. After the project details were explained, they were asked

to sign the informed consent form to use the audio-visually recorded conversation and follow-up interview data and transcripts for future research. This human subject research project plan had previously been reviewed and approved by the institutional review board of each institution.

Consequently, 10 HSU undergraduate students (L1 speakers of Japanese), 9 WU undergraduate students, and 6 UB undergraduate and graduate students (L2 or L3 learners of Japanese) participated in the project. Before the sessions, the 15 participants from UB and WU took the Simple Performance-Oriented Test (SPOT), developed at Tsukuba University, to assess their Japanese proficiency levels, ranging from intermediate to advanced. In addition to these 25 signed participants, several informal participants from HSU attended the non-recorded warm-up sessions (see Section 3.3).

3.3 Structure

The project was multidimensional. First, it was structured with three segments: warm-up, core, and follow-up. Conversation sessions formed the core, preceded by some warm-up/introduction activities, and succeeded by some follow-up/reflection activities. Second, the project contained both research and pedagogical activities. Core conversation sessions and follow-up activities are intended mainly for research purposes. However, we consider all activities, including the research component, as pedagogically-oriented. Lastly, the project involved both asynchronous and synchronous exchanges, facilitating ACMC and SCMC, respectively (see Section 2.5). Among the increasing number of communication tools available that facilitate authentic interaction and collaboration, Slack (a text communication and workspace platform) and Google Forms (a web-based survey administration software) were chosen for use in ACMC. For SCMC, we selected Remo (a virtual conferencing and networking event space) and Zoom (video communications software). Zoom is a meeting platform with which students and teachers at both ends were the most familiar. Remo creates a more casual atmosphere for meetings than Zoom, with tables and chairs neatly arranged in a fancy room. This multidimensional structure enables the “dual purpose for mutual benefits” nature of the project (see Section 3.1).

Digital native students had virtually no difficulties in using these platforms. Digital immigrant teachers were already familiar with those functions from the pressing need to learn in the previous semester (Spring, 2020) when all courses suddenly went online. Figure 2 summarizes the project design, structure, and timeline. The three segments are

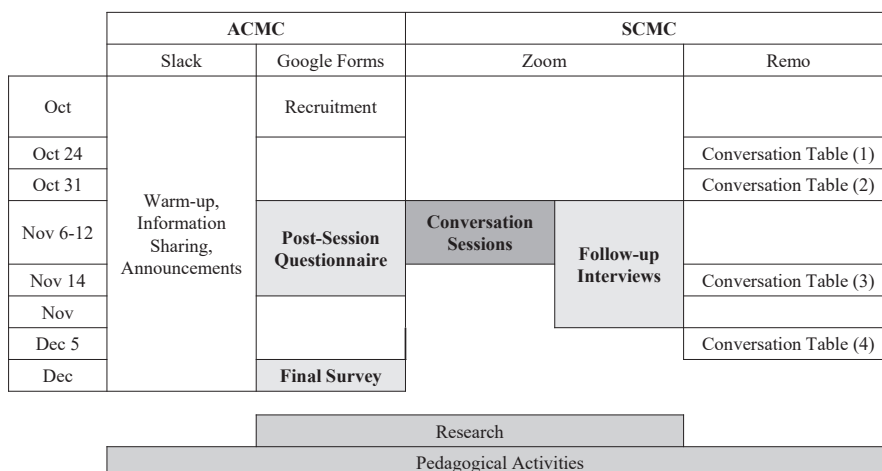


Figure 2. Project overview: structure and timeline

described in detail in the following subsections.

Warm-up Segment

The warm-up segment was twofold. After responding to the recruitment survey on Google Forms, the participants were invited to Slack, a communication and workspace platform that offers multiple chat rooms called channels, private groups, and direct messaging. The students were encouraged to get acquainted with each other by introducing themselves in Japanese and replying to each message, often with emoji buttons. Important announcements were made on the public channels. Slack serves as a community space or a community-building tool for project participants and teachers to socialize and share information about the project and the participants via an asynchronous forum.

Additionally, four conversation table (CT) sessions were provided on Remo. Remo is a virtual space for events and meetings that allows participants to move from table to table freely. It enables more flexible and casual intragroup/intergroup interactions than Zoom. The CT sessions were theme-based; the topics preset for the four CTs were (1) very Japanese and very American things, (2) Halloween in Japan and the US, (3) online cultural exchange ideas, and (4) holiday plans. In each session, free chatting on any topic of interest was encouraged when time allowed. Japanese anime, food, and sports were among the popular topics. Both Slack communication and CT sessions on Remo continued throughout the project, from warm-up to wrap-up, in asynchronous and synchronous virtual exchange forms.

Core Segment

The conversation session was the core part of the project. The participants were assigned two conversation sessions wherein 3 students engaged in a 10-minute discussion on a given topic on Zoom. The assigned task was to develop three ideas for possible online intercultural exchange activities in this pandemic-affected period of immobility. The task was presented in writing (in Japanese) prior to the session on Slack. At the beginning of the session, the participants were instructed to take notes during the discussion and verbally present their ideas after the discussion. Note-taker, discussion-leader, or presenter roles were not pre-assigned by the teacher-researcher but were voluntarily chosen among the group members. The notes taken by one participant during the session were photographed and sent later to the teacher-researcher, who later examined how notes and discussions were interrelated.

The grouping was based on three types of situations in the LMT framework: (1) partner language contact situations (for HSU/WU/UB students, hereafter PCS), (2) third-party language contact situations (for WU/UB students, hereafter TCS), and (3) first language situations (for HSU students, hereafter NS). Situations (1) and (2) exhibit JLF interactions. A group of three was an original and basic unit, but some cases ended up with a group of two or four due to scheduling difficulties. This created some unplanned varieties in the group structure and dynamics. The resulting groups were eight PCS sessions, five TCS sessions, and two NS sessions. Each session started with a brief introduction by a teacher, followed by a 10-minute discussion and a presentation, and ended with a short wrap-up and questions/comments made by the teacher. The entire session was audio-visually recorded on the Zoom. The audio data were transcribed later.

Follow-up Segment

After each conversation session, the participants were requested to answer a follow-up questionnaire to reflect on their behavior and awareness. The two sets of 20-item questions for L1 speakers and L2 learners were taken from Yoshida (2014) and are presented in the appendix. The participants answered the Google Forms questions on a 5-point Likert scale using the following descriptors: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The questions were constructed to ask how they consciously behave or make adjustments to help the communication go smoothly. The 19 participants (out of 25) completed the same questionnaire twice, after a TCS or NS session and a PCS session.

Second, the participants were invited to the semi-structured follow-up interview (FUI) on Zoom by the respective teacher-researcher at their university. The questions included the differences they found between TCS/NS and PCS and other questions elaborated from the questionnaire. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Lastly, the final survey was conducted on Google Forms after the completion of the project. The survey asked (1) which sessions the students attended, (2) how active they have been in text-based Slack communication, and (3) if they have found any friends whom they would stay in touch with outside of this project. They were also asked on Google Forms to reflect upon their own experiences and feelings and describe them specifically in about 250 words, including what they believed they learned through these events and activities in terms of language, culture, and communication. A total of 21 participants (out of 25) completed the survey.

These follow-up activities were intended for the qualitative analysis of JLF interaction, intercultural awareness, and language management process research. The activities were also regarded as opportunities for the participants' retrospective self-reflection and self-assessment by verbalizing their thoughts to facilitate their further learning. In this project, the participants were not merely viewed as human subjects but rather as language learners, JLF interactants, interculturalists, and virtual communicators in their learning process in the spirit of a broader sense of a local corpus approach.

3.4 Comparison with Past Projects

Similar research projects have been conducted at HSU, mainly by the first author in the past five years. Table 1 compares the current project with the four previous studies according to situation type, interactant number per group (#), and methodology. The five projects commonly deal with spoken interaction in Japanese in a task-based discussion setting in an academic context. They also included variants in their project design and data collection methods. The pre-pandemic projects (A) and (B) were conducted in person in on-campus meeting rooms, while projects (C) and (D) were administered thoroughly online.

Projects (B) and (D) were classroom-integrated and pedagogy-driven for a specific class objective. The L1 interaction data were collected for immediate use in the Japanese discourse seminar course in which the interactants were enrolled in the formal curriculum. The two projects were purely in the spirit of the local corpus approach (see Section 2.7).

Table 1. Comparison with past projects⁶

	Year	Situation		Participants		Design/Method
		Type	#	L1	Category	
Project (A)	2016–2017	2 PCS 2 TCS 2 NS	3	English Russian Chinese Vietnamese Japanese	Domestic and international students at HSU	In-person Classroom independent FUI
Project (B)	2019	4 NS	3	Japanese	Domestic students at HSU	In-person Classroom integrated Class discussion
Project (C)	Spring 2020	2 PCS 1 TCS 1 NS	3	English Chinese Vietnamese Japanese	Domestic and international students at HSU	Online Classroom independent FUI
Project (D)	Fall 2020	1 NS	3	Japanese	Domestic students at HSU	Online Classroom integrated Class discussion
Current Project	Fall 2020	8 PCS 5 TCS 2 NS	2–4	English Chinese Japanese	Domestic students at HSU, UB and WU	Online Classroom independent FUI

The data were used in the classroom discussion and for the students' final papers that demonstrate some language-specific features found in Japanese spoken interaction, including backchanneling *aizuchi* and fillers. On the other hand, projects (A) and (C) were classroom-independent and research-driven to gain pedagogical implications for ICL courses. The focus was on JLF interactions among participants with various L1 in PCS and comparing them with TCS and NS interactions. Project (A) data were analyzed linguistically and quantitatively for their interactional behavior in terms of speech style shifting (Shimojo, 2018a, b), interrogative expressions (Fujiwara, 2018a), sentence-final particles (Fujiwara, 2018b, 2019), and speech sequences of proposal agreement/disagreement (Watanabe, 2018, 2020), and L1 speakers' roles and behaviors (Takei & Yoshida, 2018; Takei & Fujiwara, 2020). The interactants' awareness brought to light from the follow-up interviews was also qualitatively analyzed in the LMT framework with their management processes (Takei, 2019, 2021). The insights gained from the combination of the interaction data and follow-up interviews triggered the current project, with more emphasis added

6 Project (A) was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP15K02774 and project (B) by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP20K00717.

on pedagogical aspects.

The participants in projects (A) and (C) were both domestic and (physically incoming) international students at HSU. At the time of the post-pandemic project (C), eight inbound international students physically remained in Japan. However, due to mobility and contact restrictions in the COVID-19 situation, the international students participated in the conversation sessions from their off-campus residence rooms, and domestic students did so from their homes via Zoom.

The current project evolved into a new scheme in light of the findings and implications of these four previous data collection projects. Although classroom-independent, it has become more evenly pedagogy-driven and research-driven. More meticulous attention is paid to ICT potentials and CMC features in the project design. One striking characteristic of the current project lies in the categorization of participants. The participants were from Japan and the US. They participated from their “homes,” so they were neither inbound nor outbound, neither domestic nor international.

4. Conclusion and Future Directions

We presented the rationale for and design of the online conversation project between universities in Japan and the US. The project attempted to realize IaH practices in the form of OIE. Contrary to the claim made by Beelen and Jones (2015) in their definition that IaH should reach all students, the project remained a short-term informal activity outside of the curriculum with voluntary participation. Therefore, it is de facto a bottom-up implementation effort on a personal level. The effort is in line with the belief that IaH “relies less on top-down policies than bottom-up development (Beelen, 2017: 28)” and is in the spirit of local learner corpus research. Due to the page limit of this study, the authors will present and discuss findings from the data analysis in forthcoming articles. However, though small in scale, this dual-purpose project proved to be promising as an IaH effort and local corpus research and pedagogy, as evidenced by the participants’ overall positive reactions to the given contact opportunities and the quantitatively and qualitatively analyzable data obtained from the conversation sessions and follow-up surveys and interviews. The data have the potential to yield interactant-type (L1 and L2) and situation-type (PCS, TCS, and NS) specific results and implications.

Additionally, the project drew the authors’ attention to one particular point of scholarly

and pedagogical interest concerning its “virtuality.” Leask (2015) questioned the use of dichotomous terms of “international student” and “domestic student” as concealing the diversity within each group (p. 11). Bruhn (2020) further claimed that terms, such as home/abroad and incoming/outgoing, are not helpful in VE where the physical location is irrelevant. This study conventionally uses the dyad of “international vs. domestic students” in the context of ICL courses offered in Japan. However, when we think of the actual space where both parties meet and interact in this project, that is, on Slack, Remo, or Zoom, these polarizations do not seem to be meaningful. Neither the US nor the Japan group is incoming or outgoing. They meet somewhere in between. Neither probably regards themselves as “international students” or “guests.” Do they reside and study “at home” or “abroad”? This is a challenging question to answer. That is, Kramsch’s (2009) notion of “thirdness” comes into play. Since Bhabha (1994) originated the concept in his postcolonial theory, thirdness has been conceptualized and theorized in various disciplines, such as “third culture” in foreign language education (Kramsch, 1993) and as “third place” in urban sociology (Oldenburg, 1999). Dooly (2011) explored online interaction discourse and identity constructed in a virtual third space. Markiewicz (2019) argued for the concept of a “virtual third place” with the emerging technology that creates a new kind of communication in the virtual space. When attempting to investigate and characterize interaction in VE, the notion of “thirdness” will undeniably be a crucial point to consider in our future research.

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Appendix

Questions for post-conversation survey taken from Yoshida (2014) and translated by the authors

1. I was able to speak well in the conversation.
2. I was distracted by the recording equipment.
3. I tried to continue the conversation.
4. I spoke slowly so that the others could easily understand. [L2]
I spoke slowly to adjust to the non-native speaker’s Japanese proficiency level. [L1]
5. I chose simple vocabulary so that the others could easily understand. [L2]
I chose simple vocabulary to adjust to the non-native speaker’s Japanese proficiency level. [L1]
6. I spoke grammatically correctly so that the others could easily understand. [L2]
I spoke grammatically correctly to adjust to the non-native speaker’s Japanese proficiency level. [L1]
7. I tried to listen more than speak and to elicit the others’ opinions and thoughts.
8. I created a relaxed atmosphere.
9. I actively asked questions to get information about the others.
10. I tried to agree with the others’ opinions.
11. I asked/verified when I couldn’t understand what the other person was saying.
12. I tried to entertain the others.
13. I tried to nod and give responses (aizuchi) when the other person was talking.
14. I asked when I didn’t understand the word(s) that the others used. [L2]
I corrected when the other party’s vocabulary was incorrect. [L1]

15. I tried to understand the others' feeling.
16. I chose a topic that the others might be familiar with.
17. I listened to the end even when the other person had difficulty expressing his/her thoughts.
18. I didn't use buzzwords or slang.
19. I provided more information than I got from the others.
20. I respected the others' opinions.