

(研究ノート)

## **A study of Kanazawa Seiryō University Women's Junior College students' perceptions of the IVE project: A preliminary analysis**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a qualitative study of nine Kanazawa Seiryō University Women's Junior College (hereafter “Sei-tan”) students' perceptions of an online international exchange project. The interview analysis provides some information on the impact of this project on students' motivation towards English and interest-level in other cultures. The results suggest students have an increased interest in the international community as a result of taking part in this online project.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. Background**

According to surveys carried out by Keidanren (the Japan business federation), many Japanese companies are keen to employ students who have intercultural understanding (Keidanren, 2018). With the onset of COVID-19, however, it became difficult to raise students' awareness of this because they have been unable to travel abroad. As a result, devising a means for Japanese students to interact with students in other countries in order to develop their global awareness and build intercultural understanding became a priority. To meet this goal, and given the limitations on international travel due to COVID-19, virtual exchange was seen as a solution to engage them in intercultural communication, a view inspired by O'Dowd (2017). The present study aimed to explore the perspectives of a small number of Sei-tan students who took part in an online international exchange project. To my knowledge, no such qualitative study has been conducted with junior college students. Other quantitative studies addressing the effects of virtual exchange on language and culture learning (e.g. O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019; Hagley & Cotter, 2019; Hagley, 2020) have been carried out on university students but not junior college students.

It was initially hoped that this project would generate students' interest and orientation towards the international community by nurturing their curiosity, and that this would eventually

motivate them to have more L2 motivation. According to Yashima (2002), creating lessons that increase students' interest in different cultures is seen as a variable which influences their L2 motivation. Yashima (2000) put forward the notion of "International Posture", meaning that if Japanese students can relate themselves to the world community and not just one specific English-speaking country such as the US, this would affect their attitude and motivation towards English in a positive direction. With International Posture in mind, I wished to create an environment to support students to interact with the international community. In this online exchange project students were able to use English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (e.g. Jenkins, 2009), where they were encouraged to use English simply as a tool to communicate with students from non-English speaking countries without worrying about using perfect grammar. The Lingua Franca approach is more focused on teaching a language so that learners can "communicate" with both native and non-native speakers (Kosaka, 2014).

According to research by Taguchi (2013), by the time Japanese students enter university or college, they are already burnt out from studying English for university entrance exams, yet, students still believe they need English and show interest in learning English. During secondary schooling, the focus is on accuracy with English rather than fluency because the goal is the university entrance examination which is an extrinsic motivation. Once students reach university, they no longer have such a goal. Without such an extrinsic motivation it becomes difficult for students to find the motivation to continue with English, unless they have another form of extrinsic motivation or possess some intrinsic motivation. In order to try to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation, I introduced the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) project (Hagley, 2016), hoping that it would provide students with positive experiences with English so they may find their own meaning for pursuing English, for example for communicating with people in other countries. I also wished the students to discover other values and cultures and to have new experiences in order for them to broaden their horizons. By communicating with students in other countries, Sei-tan students can find out how people in those countries look at the world, and not simply from information which is presented to them on, for instance, the television which has already been selected and interpreted by others, as stated by Shaules (2007:14), "While mass media brings cultural difference into our homes, it may be a very shallow experience that doesn't fundamentally change our way of looking at the world. Put into more constructivist terms, these shallow intercultural experiences are put into pre-existing categories of meaning and don't fundamentally threaten the underlying framework of one's values and hidden cultural assumptions".

Although I did not believe that an 8-week online international exchange would allow students to go beyond a shallow cultural experience, at least I wanted them to learn that their own direct experiences with students in other cultures are valuable and worthwhile. I also believe that

students need to have experiences that will challenge them, which is also the rationale behind intercultural exchanges like the IVE project. One means for them to have new experiences is to engage in international exchanges. We often hear the word “globalization” being thrown around, and many people associate this with speaking English. However, what if this is not only about English, but about the ability to cross borders as someone who has the ability or skills to deal with and overcome differences in thinking and habits. As Magohiro Wada (2021:18) wrote about globalization: “It’s the ability to persevere in overcoming ‘new challenges’”. It is a skill to be able to deal with unfamiliar and uncomfortable challenges, like communicating in English (even in written form), which is simply a tool that may be used in order to communicate with others. For this reason, the IVE project is an ideal means for students to interact with students in other countries in order to develop their global awareness by giving them exposure to other cultures and to provide them with new challenges.

## **1.2. The IVE project**

The IVE project allows students to use English to interact online asynchronously with students in other non-English speaking countries. An entire class must be involved in this project, not individual students. Participation is free. The exchange runs for 8 weeks twice a year. Students are placed in groups of approximately 15-20 students with students from different countries and other parts of Japan. Students belong to a group for the 8 weeks where they are expected to participate and discuss four different topics (1. Self-introduction, 2. Where we live, 3. My culture, 4. What I learned). Students spend two weeks on each topic. There is also an Open Forum that students can take part in and create their own posts and choose their own topics. Class teachers need to monitor the groups and provide feedback when necessary. Students read posts with photos from others and reply to them. Being asynchronous means that students can read messages and reply to them at their own pace, which takes some pressure off the students who like to think about what they want to write. It is ideal for students who have a sense of autonomy and can work on their own. In contrast, it should be mentioned that those who struggle to work independently may struggle with the IVE project. The other benefit of this project is that it encourages students to use English outside of the classroom. Students are also responsible for how they communicate with other students, so if they are successful, they can feel a sense of achievement. The downside of this type of exchange is that learners feel no sense of urgency to read posts or write replies, so some find it hard to maintain their motivation, especially if they have not made it a habit to sign in and check postings as they would with other social media sites.

Through the IVE project, students are working on real-world activities by communicating through written messages with other students from different countries. During the online

exchange, students need to focus on getting their message across and need to be actively involved, so rather than focusing closely on grammar and form, they need to focus on the meaning of what they write. By focusing on the task of written communication, students can express themselves and enjoy using English for communication. It is hoped that this ELF style use of language will in turn increase their motivation towards using English.

My interest in International Posture and students' motivation towards English lead me to the following questions:

- What impact did the IVE project have on students' attitudes/motivation towards English?
- What impact did the IVE project have on students' attitudes towards other cultures?

This paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I discuss my research approach and how the data was collected and analyzed. In section 3, I will present the findings, and in section 4, I will discuss the results and provide my interpretation of these, followed by addressing the above questions based on the findings.

## **2. Research approach and design**

### **2.1. Method**

My Japanese colleague who I co-taught with (Yumi Tatsushima, hereafter “YT”), and I carried out semi-structured interviews with nine 1st year Sei-tan students individually who were taking our “Study Abroad” class during the pre- and mid-stages of the IVE project. The students were informed that the data would be used for research purposes and the students gave their consent. All the interviews were conducted in Japanese. The pre- and mid-term interviews were conducted online through Zoom by YT, and I was also present during those interviews. Before the IVE project began, we asked students what they were most interested in with the IVE project and what their concerns were. They were also asked what they felt about English and whether they thought their English would improve through the IVE project. During the mid-term IVE interviews, the students were asked what they were unable to achieve during the first half of the IVE project, and how they overcame any problems. The data from our online Zoom recordings was then outsourced to a third party who transcribed this data and profiled the students based on the questions that were asked of the students during the interviews my colleague and I conducted. For the purpose of obtaining objectivity by allowing students to speak frankly without the influence of their teachers, we outsourced the post IVE project interviews and transcription to a third party, who has previous experience working as an interviewer and marketer for group interviews at a marketing company. Before she proceeded

with interviewing the students, my colleague and I met with her on Zoom twice to give her some background about the IVE project and the procedure. For each individual student interview, I was present in the first few minutes, in order to introduce my students to her as it was the first time for them to meet. I left Zoom after the introductions in order to allow her to conduct the interviews without my presence. The length of each interview was approximately 30 minutes. She had a list of questions (see Appendix A1) which I had prepared, to ask students. I am aware of the somewhat unbalanced (in terms of the involvement of different interviewers) nature of the interview process that was carried out, yet due to time constraints it was deemed unavoidable.

In the post IVE project interviews, students were asked about each of the four mandatory topics covered in the IVE project and their impressions of these. They were also asked about the Open Forum which requires voluntary participation. The interviewer (the third party mentioned above) also asked students how often they posted or read posts, and their impressions of the group that they belonged to within the IVE project. In addition, the interviewer also asked the participants about students' attitudes towards the IVE project before and during the project, despite them being asked this same question by us, their teachers. A third party was asking the students who had no connection to the students and no influence over their grading; this was done because students may have a tendency to tell their teachers what they think they want to hear in order to please them. The students were also asked about their impressions after the IVE project had finished.

## **2.2. Interview data analysis**

Table 1 below shows the areas that I informed the third party interviewer about before the interviews:

*Table 1. Areas asked about and definition*

Areas asked about	Definition
1. Change in willingness to improve English language skills	This refers to IVE project influence on English learning and intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to learn English. Utterances need to contain words/sentences which clearly indicate increased motivation related to English learning.
2. Change in interest in other cultures	This refers to IVE project influence on students' interest in other cultures, their own culture and foreigners. Utterances need to contain words/sentences which clearly indicate learning or increased interest in other cultures, their own culture and/or foreigners.

The scope of this paper will focus on parts of the post-IVE project interview data and how this may be used to understand some of the students' perceptions of this project. The interviewer created categories after sifting through all of the interview data as follows: 1) Positive effects on English learning, 2) Negative effects on English learning, 3) Positive effects on International/Intercultural Exchanges, 4) Negative effects on International/Intercultural Exchanges. In order to present my own conclusions about the findings, I conducted qualitative content analysis which, according to Hsieh & Shannon (2005:1278) refers to "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes". From the transcribed interview audio files, I identified key concepts/themes and attached codes. I attached my own sub-categories to the interview data (see Appendix A 2) and then sorted these with relevance to my own questions.

### 3. Findings

This section presents the results with respect to the areas asked about in Table 1. Section 3.1 shows comments regarding changes in willingness to improve English, and Section 3.2 shows comments regarding increased interest in other cultures. There were significantly more comments by students related to increased interest in other cultures rather than willingness to improve their English. In order to understand students' motivation in relation to the IVE project, I applied Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which is a theory for understanding motivation in various domains such as sports, education and work. In SDT, it is said there are three basic needs which people have; competence, autonomy and relatedness, and by fulfilling these needs people can develop their motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2018). In Sections 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 I will present the data related to this.

#### 3.1. Willingness to improve English skills

Following are some comments related to students' willingness to improve their English:

- I can understand my English ability. It makes me think that my English is not good enough and I should study more.
- I've been using translation apps a lot, but there are some things I can't do with them. I need to study English more in order to talk about Japan. I want to improve my English skills by using audio and video.
- I felt it was a shame that I couldn't convey what I wanted to say to the people I had the opportunity to meet through IVE because of my English skills. I think I need to study harder, and I need to study other things as well.

### **3.2. Increased interest in other cultures**

Following are some comments related to the increase in students' interest in other cultures:

- I was able to learn about people and their lives in various countries. They showed me the scenery of their country. Without this kind of project, I probably wouldn't have become involved with people from Colombia. I'm glad I had that opportunity. My desire to know more about other countries became stronger.
- In the Forum, there were a lot of opinions about such topics as environmental issues and animals. I don't think I would have been able to understand these things if I had stayed in Japan and only taken Japanese classes. It also gave me a chance to learn and think about international issues.
- I became more interested in foreign cultures. I realized that the food and scenery really are different to Japan. Especially the scenery. I thought it was interesting and beautiful, and I would like to go there. My interest was stimulated.
- I learned a lot about the cultures of other countries. Well, only Colombia. I felt like I was able to go out of Japan into the international arena a little bit.
- There were many people who were interested in Japan. I need to know more about Japanese culture. To be honest, I didn't know what tatami was made of. I want people to know more about Japan, but more than that, I need to know myself.
- Even after you become an adult, you will have a chance to talk with foreigners someday, and since we live in an Internet society, you will be able to connect with people from overseas in various ways, not just face-to-face. IVE will be a good practice for you to connect with foreigners in the future.
- My interest in the cultures of other countries has increased. I was able to learn a lot about the food, customs, lifestyle, and many other things through various posts.
- I wrote, "I learned about cultures I didn't know existed." For example, the comment "the custom of the bride drinking all the bitter coffee at the wedding" left a strong impression on me, so I wrote, "It was interesting to be exposed to such an unfamiliar culture."
- I would recommend this class to new first-year students, because they can communicate with people from many different countries in the IVE project, while studying abroad can only take them to one country.

### **3.3. Competence**

The results show that a few students felt a sense of competence from taking part in the IVE project, and there were changes in their attitudes towards English. One student revealed how

she came to the realization that it is okay to make mistakes, and felt a sense of competence in regards to writing English:

- I was very worried that my English sentences might be rude to the other person. However, everyone just replied as usual, so I came to think that it was okay to make a few mistakes. My way of thinking about English has changed. I felt that I had overcome one hurdle in writing English.

Another student realized that through effort she could achieve positive results and therefore gain a feeling of competence:

- I can talk with other people at my own pace. The more I try, the more I get. I can grow. I can get results in line with my efforts.

One student realized that communicating with non-native speakers was a safe environment in terms of not having to worry about someone focusing on her mistakes and perhaps gained a feeling of competence:

- The thing is to connect words that you know. For this exchange, I didn't need to speak English, but had to write English. I'm not a native English speaker, and I don't need to speak, so it's pretty easy. I don't have to worry about people pointing out my mistakes, so I think my complex about English has gone.

One student even saw the IVE project as a chance to learn grammar which I found to be surprising because my understanding is that they had already learned English grammar in junior and senior high school. I suspect that she did not actually have a grasp of the grammar and sought to learn it again. Nevertheless, she felt that her English had improved through the IVE project, thus giving her a feeling of competence:

- Since we can't see each other's faces, we can only communicate through writing, which helps us improve our English and gives us a chance to learn grammar. I think my English skills have improved more than before the IVE project.

Another student also saw some improvement in her English, which is also important to gain a sense of competence:

- I think my ability to make sentences in English has improved.

Another student also felt a sense of satisfaction when she was able to convey her message, and realized that it could be done simply:

- I had a good feeling that I was getting the message across. I replied quickly in a short time. There were times when I skimmed on sentence structure or used really simple English sentences, and that may have made the difference.

### **3.4. Autonomy**

One student showed relief that she did not have to work on the IVE project alone, so her fear of having to learn autonomously was removed:

- Studying independently is quite difficult. We did not have to work alone all the time. We exchanged opinions and shared information with each other. There were no specific instructions for writing in English, so I just wrote what I thought and sent it out.

One student actually became autonomous by taking strategies, and this signals to me a move towards intrinsic motivation:

- I can spend a lot of time thinking about the interaction in writing. If I didn't understand a word, I would look it up and reply. I would rewrite the text into English and then translate it into Japanese to check if it was OK. If it wasn't, I could find out immediately by using Google Translate.

Another student became autonomous by making an effort, because she had a purpose; to communicate. She also found strategies for making progress, which also shows a move towards intrinsic motivation:

- I wanted to speak and communicate, so I tried to explain in detail and wrote English sentences even though I was not very good at it. After researching what I wanted to say in Japanese, I looked for English sentences describing Japan on the Internet and wrote English while referring to them. I also referred to the comments of other contributors to help me write. It took a lot of time and effort.

### 3.5. Relatedness

These students experienced a feeling of being valued by others and had generally positive experiences:

- When I wrote “I’m not good at English, but please be my friend,” they replied, “It’s totally fine,” which made me happy.
- I was also happy that they understood my poor English and replied in a kind way. I was more than happy to be able to make friends and learn about the culture through English.
- I had a fresh, impressionable and valuable experience. I had never been involved with people from overseas before. I talked with people I didn’t know at all and whose faces I had never seen. It was refreshing to talk and learn about my own country and theirs.

## 4. Discussion

Overall, it seems that the IVE project met students’ basic needs for motivation with regard to competence, autonomy, and relatedness, yet, the data reveals that students’ sense of competence was much stronger than their feelings of relatedness or autonomy. On the other hand, students’ willingness to improve their English was weak, indicating the necessity of further research to identify other variables that are involved.

In relation to the competence aspect of SDT, the IVE project can be taken as functioning in a similar way to a “task” which is described in Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) as focusing on meaning rather than on form (Ellis, 2018); namely, focusing on real-world activities and the use of language to achieve a means to an end, rather than teaching specific grammar points, and thus promote a sense of achievement in students, leading to a feeling of competence. I wanted students to focus on the task at hand, namely, communicating with other students in English, rather than the linguistic aspect (correct grammar etc.). In TBLT, the outcome is more important than the linguistic factor, so if students are able to achieve the outcome of the task, which is to communicate with other students in their IVE project group, which is a real-world task, then it may lead students to gaining a sense of competence as they successfully completed the goal of communicating. In TBLT, a task is introduced, in this case the task of reading posts and writing replies, and students are expected to complete the task using the English that they already know. As the goal is to communicate with non-native English speakers in the IVE project, the data reveals that students did gain a sense of competence, so the effectiveness of the IVE project was confirmed to some extent.

In relation to the autonomous aspect of SDT, the IVE project allows students to have control over what they read and what they write. They are free to approach the task as they wish.

Students can choose what to write about and make their own decisions about when to read and post replies. They also have the choice of choosing topics they are interested in. However, this autonomous approach to language learning does not come naturally to Japanese students as they are accustomed to a transmission of knowledge approach. There were very few comments related to autonomy, so it seems that the unstructured and free approach of the IVE project may not be suitable for some students. I believe that more research is necessary here.

In relation to the relatedness aspect of SDT, the IVE project allowed students to interact with the students within their IVE project group online. It required the students to share personal information or opinions. If students feel accepted by others, it allows them to feel that sense of relatedness. There were also very few comments concerning relatedness, so perhaps this was not something of great importance for students. More research is also necessary here.

Based on the findings presented in the previous section, following is my interpretation of what the findings tell us more holistically. First, in terms of the impact on students' attitudes/motivation towards English (the issue pertaining to number 1 in Table 1), as shown in the interview data in section 3.3, the students' confidence with English increased as a result of taking part in the IVE project which supports Hagley's (2020) similar findings, and this is necessary for increasing students' willingness to communicate in English. Although the IVE project met students' basic needs for motivation in relation to SDT, in particular the competence aspect, there was no indication of their general motivation towards wanting to improve their English. A few students realized that they need to study English more. Their comments indicate that they feel like they 'should' study rather than actually 'want' to study, and this shows that they are being motivated extrinsically rather than intrinsically. However, I believe that increasing students' sense of competence with English is a positive step towards empowering them by giving them confidence and stimulating their intrinsic motivation to communicate in English. Whether this is maintained or not remains to be seen because motivation is an extremely complex area and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, in terms of the impact on students' attitudes towards other cultures and their own culture (the issue pertaining to number 2 in Table 1), it seems that their interest in other cultures increased, so this supports other research carried out by Hagley and Cotter (2019) where the results of their quantitative study show that the IVE project increased students' interest in other countries. The IVE project was a success because it met my original goal: to raise students' international posture; increased interest in the international community. One student even realized the importance of being able to communicate with people in other countries and I think this also may be considered a step towards having international posture. It is also very significant that some students also realized the necessity of learning more about their own culture. Without taking part in the IVE project students may not have realized this.

There was much more data from the interviews showing students' increased interest in other cultures rather than their willingness towards improving their English. Students said they were able to learn about foreign cultures that they did not know about. For them, it was a new experience to talk with students from non-English speaking countries and to talk about their country. They realized that people from some other countries are very interested in Japan, and also that despite their perceived lack of English ability, they discovered that the students in other countries were still kind to them and they could still make friends with them through English. These factors may lead to raising students' self-esteem and raise their awareness and interest in the international community, which, according to Yashima (2002) can increase their willingness to communicate in English.

While the IVE project increased students' interest in other cultures, it seems to be only at the raising awareness level rather than any deep understanding of the other cultures. As suggested by Hagley (2020) students need to understand their own culture before they can appreciate another culture, yet I feel that students are unable to understand their own culture without going outside their own culture, either by going abroad or by having exposure to other cultures, which is why the IVE is a great springboard for students to also become more aware of their own culture through exposure to other cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

As a result of taking part in the online exchange project, students' attitudes towards the international community were very positive. The goal of the IVE project was to plant a seed for some students and that this would lead them to increase their international posture, and at this very initial stage, that may be the case, however whether this is sustainable is worth further study. Due to time constraints, we were unable to collect additional interview data. More of an enquiry is needed into finding out how students can maintain their motivation during the IVE project. Furthermore, more profiling of the students' past experiences with English is necessary in order to understand their experiences more. The present study was exploratory in that it examined the IVE project experiences of nine participants belonging to the same junior college in Japan. Since it was a very small-scale study in a specific junior college context, the findings may not be generalized to other junior college contexts. A follow-up study is also necessary to find out the long-term impact of the IVE project on students' interest in other cultures.

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## Appendix

### A1. Final interview questions

1. What do you think are the good/bad points about the IVE project?
2. Which parts of the IVE project were easy/difficult for you?
3. How do you think the IVE project can be improved?

4. To what extent do you believe that participating in the IVE project equates to participating in the international community?
5. Because of participating in the IVE project, do you feel more motivated to speak English more and/or learn more about other cultures?
6. Are you more interested in other countries or cultures because of taking part in the IVE project?

A2. Sub-categories

1. Sense of improvement
2. Sense of competence
3. Willingness to improve English
4. Self-autonomy
5. Relatedness
6. Students' beliefs overturned
7. Positive learning experience
8. Cultural learning