

A Pilot Study in Intercultural Communication Between EFL Learners in Japan and Denmark

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In today's global society communication is becoming an increasingly important priority. Recent curriculum guidelines from MEXT for teaching English stress more focus on improving communication skills, as does the curriculum for teaching English in Denmark. This includes training students to become good intercultural communicators. This paper will describe a case study of a language exchange between Japanese and Danish EFL learners and report on their experiences during their intercultural interactions. The interactions took place via email and Skype conversations where the students talked about everyday life and studying English in their respective cultures. The participants were then asked to respond to a questionnaire about their experiences and impressions of the exchange. The students' responses indicated that participants gained some insights into both their own culture and the other culture. Additionally, the results indicated that they gained an awareness of what skills are required for intercultural communication. However, logistic issues, short preparation time and a mismatch in their English levels caused them difficulties. Based on the results of the questionnaire we would argue that in spite of some of the difficulties in organizing such an exchange it can be very valuable for the students to develop intercultural competence.

BACKGROUND

The globalization taking place in today's world has led to new views on English teaching and communication. English has been generally accepted as the de facto lingua franca of the world. It is unique in that it has more speakers who speak it as a second language (505 million) than native speakers (335 million), and many more who speak it as a foreign/second language (Ethnologue.com). This means that many communications that take place in English will not involve any native speakers. This, along with the cultural differences between English native speakers, the cultural diversity now possible due to cultural interactions through the internet, and the increased ease with which people can now travel, has led researchers such as Byram (1997) and Kramsch (2010) to argue for a wider view of culture and a move away from traditional teaching that focuses mainly on British and American culture. More

focus is placed on the students improving their generic skills in intercultural communication rather than general information about English speaking nations. Risager (2008) considers all exchanges between cultures relevant for learning to communicate in English as long as they take place in English.

Byram (1997) divides the ability of a speaker to conduct a successful intercultural interaction into five different skillsets:

- *Knowledge*: Of yourself, your culture and other cultures
- *Attitude*: Curiosity and openness, to be willing to set aside your beliefs and accept new ideas
- *Interpretation*: The ability to interpret information of another culture and relate it to one's own
- *Discovery and interaction*: The ability to discover new information about a culture and put it to use in an interaction
- *Critical cultural awareness*: To be able to critically evaluate your own and other cultures objectively

This view of what makes for a competent intercultural communicator has influenced the case study described in this paper greatly. The purpose of the exchange was not only to increase the students' awareness of other cultures, but also to raise the participants' awareness of what it takes to be a good intercultural communicator. A questionnaire was administered to the participants to gather feedback and measure the success of the project.

PARTICIPANTS

The short exchange project was carried out between a class of 22 Japanese students at Kwansei Gakuin University and a group of nine Danish students at University College Sjaelland.

The Danish students are currently taking a distance course in teaching intercultural communication as part of the English language classes required for trainee teachers. This teaching of intercultural communication is integrated into the English curriculum in Denmark. The students are considered to be advanced level English learners and the majority of them are taking distance courses because they are already working as teachers. The class actually consists of 14 students but due to work schedules and the time difference only nine were able to participate. Since most of the students are taking the course to broaden their teaching competence while working, there was a far larger age range in their cohort compared to their Japanese counterparts. Since intercultural communication is part of their current studies most of them are aware of the skills required for successful communication, but were not very familiar with Japanese culture and were eager to see how this sort of exchange would work in practice.

The Japanese students that took part in the project were Sociology majors taking a four-skills English language class three times a week for one semester. They are considered to be intermediate level English students, but many of them had had very few opportunities to practice spoken English in their previous English education. The Japanese students were all first year students, so their age range was far more homogenous than the Danish group. Since they had not studied intercultural communication, they were given a short introduction to Danish society and culture and other information relevant to the exchange. Their primary interest in the project was to meet and practice their conversational skills with someone from a foreign country.

INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION

In order for the students to experience both direct and indirect communication it was decided that the exchange would consist of a preliminary email exchange and followed by a real time conversation via Skype. Skype was selected as it is a widely known, reliable, and free software which can be used by anyone who has a smartphone or computer.

The Japanese students were grouped in groups of two or three since there were 22 of them and only nine Danish students. The Danish students were given the option of doing the exchange alone, in pairs, or in groups of three. Those Danish students that choose to participate in groups were asked to meet with more than one group of Japanese students. Participants were then asked to provide an email address and their availability to talk on Skype to the teachers overseeing the exchange. The students were then matched according to their availability. The Danish students were asked to initiate the email contact and all students were instructed to introduce themselves to each other in the emails, arrange a time for the Skype conversation, and to discuss possible topics for the Skype conversation. The students were given instructions that the Skype meeting should be at least 20 minutes in length and that all participants in the meeting should ask some questions. They were given a timeframe of two and a half weeks in which to arrange and complete the Skype component of the exchange. Scheduling proved too difficult for two groups of two Japanese students, so they carried out the meeting face-to-face with the Danish students' teacher who was visiting Kwansei Gakuin University at the time. Including these two groups, there were a total of 10 groups, however two of those groups were unable to complete the meeting component due to unexpected scheduling changes.

QUESTIONNAIRE

After they had completed the interactions with their exchange partners all students were asked to fill out an on-line questionnaire (see Appendix A for the full questionnaire). The questionnaire was used to gauge whether the project had increased not only the students' knowledge of the other culture, but also

whether it had made them more aware of their own and what it takes to be an intercultural communicator. The first section of the questionnaire was comprised of nine background questions to establish participants' age and previous exposure to intercultural communication and preparedness for the project. The second section was comprised of 13 Likert scale questions, these 13 items were subdivided into four categories: overall impression (including logistics), emailing, the spoken component (Skype or on campus), and intercultural communication. The respondents could choose from four options, with the 'not sure' or 'neutral' option being omitted due to concerns that respondents may use that option to avoid making a choice (see Dornyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 28). The final section was comprised of three open-ended questions and one yes/no question aimed at having the respondents reflect in more detail and at getting respondents opinions about possibilities for future exchanges.

RESULTS

Of the nine Danish participants, seven responded to the questionnaire, and all 22 of the Japanese participants responded. The first section of the questionnaire showed significant differences between the Japanese and Danish respondents in relation to age with all the Japanese students being aged between 18 and 20, and with three Danish students aged 31-40, 3 aged 41-50 and one aged 51-60. In relation to previous exposure to English, overseas travel and intercultural exchange the Danish students had a vast amount of exposure, all had travelled overseas more than 10 times, with just one of the Japanese students having been abroad more than three times, 10 having been abroad 1-3 times, and 11 having never been abroad. 14 of the respondents indicated that they had prepared by reading about the other culture, 10 of these indicated that this had been helpful in preparing for the exchange while four indicated that it had not helped.

For the categories in Section 2 of the questionnaire Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to establish reliability.

TABLE 1
Variables With Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients

Scales	Number of Items	Cronbach's α	
		Japanese (N=22)	Danish (N=7)
Overall impression (including logistics)	3	.152	.462
Emailing	2	.253	-1.158
Spoken component (Skype or on campus)	4	.725	.667
Intercultural communication	4	.424	.682

An alpha of between .6 and .7 constitutes an acceptable fit, and an alpha of .7 to .9 represents a good fit (Kline, 1999). The only one of the four categories which produced an acceptable fit was the spoken component. The issues with the reliability may be attributable to the wording (Lamb, 2012) or to the small number of items in the category (Pallent, 2010). Given that this was a pilot study, it was decided to conduct further analyses in spite of concerns about the reliability.

Independent sample-t-tests were conducted for each of the four categories in Section 2 of the survey to compare the responses of the Japanese respondents with the responses of the Danish respondents.

TABLE 2
Results of Independent sample t Tests (Japanese (N=22), Danish (N=7))

Scales	Group	M	SD	df	t	p	Effect Size (d)																												
Overall impression (including logistics)	Japanese	3.121	.431	27	1.192	.243	0.00008																												
	Danish	2.905	.371					Emailing	Japanese	2.938	.728	27	-.715	.481	-0.343	Danish	3.143	.476	Spoken component (Skype or on campus)	Japanese	2.222	.593	22	-3.39	.003	-1.603	Danish	3.167	.584	Intercultural communication	Japanese	3.056	.407	22	-1.56
Emailing	Japanese	2.938	.728	27	-.715	.481	-0.343																												
	Danish	3.143	.476					Spoken component (Skype or on campus)	Japanese	2.222	.593	22	-3.39	.003	-1.603	Danish	3.167	.584	Intercultural communication	Japanese	3.056	.407	22	-1.56	.134	-0.685	Danish	3.375	.518						
Spoken component (Skype or on campus)	Japanese	2.222	.593	22	-3.39	.003	-1.603																												
	Danish	3.167	.584					Intercultural communication	Japanese	3.056	.407	22	-1.56	.134	-0.685	Danish	3.375	.518																	
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The third category, the spoken component, showed a significant difference between the Japanese students' (M=2.222, SD=0.593) and the Danish students' (M=3.167, SD=0.584) conditions; $t(22)=-3.39$, $p=0.003$. Given that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients also indicated an acceptable level of reliability, this result can be said to be significant. These results indicate that the Danish students were significantly more comfortable with the spoken component of the exchange than their Japanese counterparts. This seems reasonable in light of the disparity in their linguistic levels.

While the other three categories did not produce reliable or statistically significant results, a comparison of the means is still valid. The Japanese students ($M=3.121$, $SD=.431$) had a more positive view of the exchange as a whole and of the logistics than the Danish students ($M=2.905$, $SD=.371$). Given that they found the spoken component to be more difficult, it was not surprising that the Japanese students ($M=2.938$, $SD=.728$) also found the emailing component more difficult than the Danish students ($M=3.143$, $SD=.476$). In the final category, the mean for the Danish students ($M=3.375$, $SD=.518$) indicated that they felt a greater cultural disparity than their Japanese counterparts ($M=3.056$, $SD=.407$) and that they learned more about the other culture.

In section three of the questionnaire, students were first asked if they would like to participate in a similar exchange in the future. Of the Japanese students, 15 answered yes, and seven answered no. Four of the Danish students answered yes, with three answering no. Respondents were then asked what was the most important thing they learned about their exchange partner's culture and their own. The responses varied greatly, see Appendix B for the full list of responses. Some of the pertinent comments from the Japanese participants were in relation to becoming more flexible in their thinking:

“(I learned) to think with flexibility.”

“It is the way I think about new cultures is flexible.”

Other Japanese students commented on the English language learning opportunities and English education:

“I found English Linguistics is very interesting. I can enjoy studying it.”

“The education of English in Japan starts at a little later age.”

Some focused on Japanese and Danish culture and education:

“When they start learning English they sing songs and do grammar exercises. The teacher does not speak English in class, that was quite a shock.”

“Japanese school system is different from Danish school system.”

Many participants commented on the logistics including the Skype component and scheduling:

“I would like to see the other persons' face on a screen because I couldn't see them and felt a little worried.”

“Better correspondence from the people in project about time for the Skype meeting.”

“A better Skype connection. It was very bad at times.”

In the other comments section, many students reported that they had enjoyed the exchange and would like to participate again:

“This project was a good opportunity for me”.

“I'm glad to have a precious opportunity like this”.

“I think it was a very good initiative”.

DISCUSSION

One of the main goals of this pilot study was to give the participants exposure to intercultural communication and to increase their intercultural communicative competence. Though the students encountered a number of difficulties during the project the results of the questionnaire offer some very positive indicators that future iterations of the project would enable students to meet these goals. Many of the comments suggested that the participants had gained awareness of the skills required for intercultural communication, such as those put forward by Byram at the start of this paper. It is not surprising that the Danish students were aware of these skills since they were actively undertaking a content-based course on intercultural communication, but the responses of the Japanese students, who were not actively studying intercultural communication, also suggested that they had gained some insight into intercultural communication. Some of the Japanese students commented on the importance of flexibility, this could be seen as similar to awareness in Byram's model, and others commented that more knowledge of the other culture prior to the exchange would have helped. In addition to their comments on the other culture, some of the participants commented on how their own culture was perceived by others, and even things that they had come to feel were lacking in their own culture as a result of the exchange, which suggests that they showed critical awareness. Additionally, the fact that 66% of the participants expressed interest in participating in a similar project in the future was encouraging.

Though there was a lot of positive feedback from the questionnaire, students did experience some difficulties and these were mainly in relation to preparation, logistics, and language ability. The project was put together and executed in a rather short period of time, perhaps more preparation time and some more time for the emailing component would have helped. It was felt that allowing the students more freedom to choose topics would allow for a more relaxed first meeting. However, some students reported that they were not comfortable with the amount of information about their exchange partners and expressed that more guidance in relation to topics would have helped them during the Skype conversation. The issue of the mismatch in language ability and age is a more complex one. With the Japanese students having limited spoken English and the Danish students having limited opportunities to use their advanced English, it could be argued that neither group was getting exactly what they needed to develop as language learners. On the other hand,

we would assert that such a gap in levels and ages would lead to both the Japanese and Danish participants having to utilize crucial intercultural communication skills, which this project aimed to develop, by interacting with students of different a different age, nationality and level. However, interacting with student of the same age or with shared interests would be likely to increase motivation and to lead to friendships that would extend beyond the project.

There were also some logistical difficulties, these were caused by the time difference, and by busy work and school schedules. These made it difficult for some groups to arrange the Skype session within the prescribed two-and-a-half-week period; one group was granted a one-week extension, and two other groups could not complete the Skype session. There were also some issues with the Skype software; these may be attributable to unfamiliarity with the software and poor internet connections. The final and perhaps most pertinent problem was that the Japanese students reported having difficulty with the spoken component, the statistical analysis revealed them to be significantly less comfortable with speaking in English than their Danish counterparts.

CONCLUSION

In regards to future iterations of this project, we would propose three changes to make the exchange run more smoothly, and for it to be more beneficial to participants. Firstly, the technical side of the project could be improved by a Skype orientation session, and the scheduling difficulties could be alleviated by the use of a scheduling tool such as Google calendar. Secondly, we would propose that more time be spent preparing the students for the exchange; possibilities for this include in-class discussion and brainstorming of questions, and online research to learn about their exchange partner's country and intercultural communication in general. We would not, however, advocate an overly structured or rigid approach since we contend that learning about your interlocutor and adapting throughout the conversation is an important component of intercultural communication. Finally an exchange where participants are of the same age group and possibly in a similar academic field may serve to increase students' motivation to participate in the project, since it would increase the possibility of creating friendships that might extend beyond the project.

Despite the difficulties mentioned in this paper, the questionnaire results indicated that the project was successful, allowing the relatively inexperienced Japanese students to reflect and show awareness of the difficulties and skills required for intercultural communication. The Danish students' feedback also indicated that they gained some insight into Japanese culture. In conclusion, we propose that similar projects can be implemented with relative ease with consideration of the improvements recommended above. The results of the questionnaire indicate that a project such as this one can be highly beneficial to students' intercultural communicative competence.

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APPENDIX A: The Questionnaire

Section 1

1. Name (optional)
2. University
3. Age
4. How many times have you traveled to countries where they speak a different language?
5. Have you ever participated in an exchange between cultures in school before (Such as exchange studies or pen pal projects)?
6. Outside of school how often do you communicate with someone from a different culture in written English? (E-mail, blog, forum, social networking websites like Facebook) Choose the option that best fits you.
7. Outside of school how often do you communicate with someone from a different culture in spoken English? (face to face, Skype, telephone) Choose the option that best fits you.
8. Before this project did you in your own time look for and read information about the country and culture of the person you were going to talk to?
9. (Only if the answer to question 8 was yes) The information that I found was helpful to me during the e-mail and skype exchange.

Section 2

(Likert scale items with four answer choices: Strongly Disagree; Somewhat Disagree; Somewhat Agree; Strongly Agree)

Opinions about the exchange as a whole (including logistics and technical aspects)

10. The information provided to me by the teacher/teachers about the other culture was helpful to me during the e-mail and Skype exchange.
11. I think the setup for the exchange was a good one (working in groups using both written and direct spoken communication).
12. I think that this project was a good way of learning and practicing English.

Opinions about the emailing component

13. I found the e-mails from my exchange partner easy to understand.
14. I found it easy to express what I wanted to say in the e-mail(s) I exchanged with my partner.

Opinions about the spoken component (Skype or on campus)

15. During the conversation I found the other person's use of language (grammar, vocabulary) easy to understand.
16. I found the other persons way of speaking (accent, clearness of pronunciation, voice volume) easy to understand.
17. I found it easy to use English (grammar and vocab) in the conversation.
18. I found it easy to express my ideas, culture and way of thinking in English.

Opinions about cultural exchange

19. Before meeting my exchange partner(s) I expected the other person's behavior, ideas, culture and way of thinking to be very different from mine.
20. After meeting them I think that their behavior, ideas, culture and way of thinking is very different from mine.
21. I feel that I learned something new about the other person's culture.
22. The project made me think about how my own culture works.

Section 3

23. I would like to participate in a similar or a continuation of this exchange in the future. (yes or no)
24. The most important and useful thing I think I learned about my own or the other person's culture was:
25. If I participate in a project like this in the future I would like to see the following changes:
26. Other comments (optional):

APPENDIX B: Responses to Open-ended Questions in Section 3

Question 23. The most important and useful thing I think I learned about my own or the other person's culture was:

Japanese Students

1. To think with flexibility
2. They believe Jesus strongly.
3. Before I explain my own culture to the other persons, I don't prepare difficult words that is peculiar in Japanese but prepare easy words so that they can easily understand.
4. Meeting a person from foreign country
5. It is the way I think about cultures is flexible.
6. Japanese school system is different from Danish school system.
7. Almost Danish like Sushi.
8. The education of English in Japan is started little later age. but In Danish is started faster.
9. I found English Linguistics is interesting. I can enjoy studying it.
10. The difference of attitudes toward energy between Japanese and Danish.
11. All over the world have a lot of culture, but it is sometimes very similar.
12. to attempt to understand it.
13. Denmark has little snow in that season.
14. Japanese are thought as polite in Europe. And anime made in Japan is popular.
15. the system of the governments
16. to understand and respect each cultures
17. I realize that I'm happy in Japan because of knowledge about foreign country's culture.
18. I found out that welfare is fulfill in Denmark, so people feel comfortable to live. I thought some people don't make effort because their future is guaranteed by social system.
19. the tool of his transportation , festival
20. pronunciation
21. Japan is not always so famous in every foreign countries than I expected.
22. I didn't complete this project, so I don't know.

Danish Students

23. How different the education systems were.
24. The most important thing that I have learned is how we have very different ways of thinking education.
25. My conversation lasted more than 60 minutes simultaneously with both, but very difference Japanese students. It was clear they did not know each others, maybe my expectations were inaccurate.
26. Danes are more easy and outgoing than the Japanese. The Japanese are very structured and have a hard time thinking out of the box.
27. Japanese people are very polite and apologized even when not necessary. Their oral English skills are very poor and we learned that it was because they hardly speak the language in class. When they start learning English they sing songs and do grammar exercises. The teacher does not speak English in class, that was quite a shock.
28. It is quite some weeks ago we talked to the Japanese students, so I can't remember all the things we talked about. I remember we talked about the Danish queen and I got the impression that they thought it was very unusual that a woman had that responsibility. We also talked about churches and the influence of religion, but unfortunately I can't remember what exactly we talked about.
29. I was not part of the first Skype meeting, so therefor some strange answers. The next Skype meeting never came up.

Question 25. If I participate in a project like this in the future I would like to see the following changes:

Japanese Students

1. I have no idea now.
2. Yes, because I want to talk with someone face to face.
3. I would like to see the other persons' face on a screen because I couldn't see them and felt a little worried.
4. Cultural changes
5. Communication(face to face)
6. None
7. It was difficult for me to talk in Skype because Skype didn't work very well.
8. I want to be change the communication tool. Skype is little confuse.

9. Nothing.
10. I would like to talk with people of similar age to us, because I talked with two Danish students both are over 30s, so I felt awkward .
11. I'd like to enhance my English and comunicate skill.
12. I improve command of English more and want to participate with confidence.
13. improve my hearing skill
14. I would like to be able to speak English more fluently.
15. I want to be given structured themes.
16. to be able to talk with foreign people in English fluently
17. Nothing.
18. I'd like to see what we(our ages) have to do for society because we can find good point and bad point, and get to know each other in our talking.
19. who has interesting in my country's culture.
whose hobby is similar to mine.
20. how to express own opinion
21. I had I think to have more information about them. I don't mean I wanted to know who is them. Where we know few things about each country, culture, climate, our conversation is unstable. Good conversation needs more things in common.
It seemed my partners prepared some questions on their special study, but we didn't.
If we should take part in such projects, we will have to prepare what to speak to in advance.
22. not
23. A better Skype connection. It was very bad at times.

Danish Students

24. I would suggest a common flexible structure that can guide one or give possible ideas on themes for the Skype meting.
I would expect the exchange students to be more comfortable speaking English. After the Skype meeting, I felt that I had a monologue!
25. I prefer the Japanese part to show either knowledge in my culture or willingness to share Japanese culture with me
Unaware of what topic could be of interest - up front I tried to give an introduction on myself by mail, but did not receive any in return.
26. I don't see a need for any changes
27. I found it difficult to communicate even with simple sentences. Maybe the Japanese students should have had help to understand and answer our

questions before the Skype meeting. But very interesting to hear about the Japanese school system

28. A good communication between the groups is important.
I think it could be a good idea if the students prepare some concrete questions they want to ask the other students.
29. Better correspondence from the people in project about time for the Skype meeting etc.

26: Other Comments

Japanese Students

- 1.
- 2.
3. Sometimes I exchange email with my foreign friends. It is very fun. So I want to exchange email with more foreign people.
- 4.
5. I want to try to study English harder.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
10. During our conversation, we talked about green energy several times. It was good for me because I had wanted to know how do people outside Japan think about nuclear power and green energy. In this respect, this project was a good opportunity for me.
- 11.
12. That even a gesture can tell even if it does not occur to English immediately when I convey that I want to say to a partner. It was revealed that it should not be only the feeling that I wanted to come to be able to talk by English. To that end, I felt that you must make that there more it efforts.
- 13.
- 14.
15. I was glad to have the chance to talk with the person from another country.
16. I'm glad to have a precious opportunity like this.
17. Thanks to your efforts about this project.
- 18.

19. Thank you for your project.
- 20.
- 21.
- 22.

Danish Students

23. We did not talk to one of the groups because of a misunderstanding. They did not confirm the time suggested, so we thought they could not make it. Sorry!
24. I think it was a very good initiative.
25. The two persons I talked with, had very different interest in English language - one was in her 1st year studying English (lack of skills understandable) the other studied psychology, but was interested in going abroad...she was 5 years older and very proficient.
- 26.
- 27.
- 28.
- 29.