Project redesigning for U.S.-Japan COIL

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Abstract

This practice report describes an annual Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project between a content course taught in English at a university in Japan (JPU) and a Japanese-language course at a university in the U.S. (AMU). Shared learning objectives include practicing communicative skills in the target language and engaging in critical writing in the target language, reflecting on the discussions. There are two sets of activities: (1) JPU-centered, English-based activities and (2) AMU-centered, Japanese-based activities, which take place concurrently. Some activities are done individually (e.g., discussion posts, journals, and reflection papers), while online discussions are conducted in transpacific groups both in class and outside the class period. After six weeks of collaboration, each student writes a reflective, multi-draft essay in the target language. Running the two sets of activities can confuse students easily and requires careful preparations, clear instructions, and a high level of instructor involvement. Various modifications have been made for improvements since the initial implementation in 2019 to provide a learning environment that allows for a more in-depth and diverse exchange of perspectives (Nishio et al., 2020). Flexibility is the key to success for educators to help maximize student learning in COIL.

Keywords: COIL; Japan; language learning; intercultural awareness; synchronous video discussion

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How to cite this article: Nishio, T. (2023). Project redesigning for U.S.-Japan COIL. Journal of Virtual Exchange, 6, 1–11, https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.6.38835
1. Introduction

Virtual exchange (VE) has become an essential modality of teaching and learning in many higher education institutions in their endeavor for internationalization. The global pandemic that started in 2019 further encouraged educators to adopt VE as a new educational ecosystem that allows students to engage in the global dialogue without leaving their home country (O’Dowd, 2021). While the benefits of such educational endeavors are notable, the increasing number of practice reports also shows that VE comes with challenges and barriers on many levels, such as collaboration between multiple instructors, technology, and assessments, among others (EVALUATE Group, 2019).

Setting up a VE project is a challenge, and improving the project design for increased effectiveness is another. O’Dowd (2020) stresses the importance of attending to how the “virtual models and tasks are designed and the manner in which the virtual interactions are integrated into the formal learning process” (p. 478). In this light, the role of the teacher is crucial in making necessary modifications to the task design by evaluating the effectiveness of the ongoing project (Müller-Hartmann, 2012; O’Dowd, 2020; Richardson, 2016; Ruther et al., 2021).

This practice report describes a case where the importance of project design and modifications was highlighted. The project started in 2019 between a global studies course at a university in Japan and a Japanese-language course at a university in the U.S., and several modifications have been made to the project to improve its effectiveness (Nishio et al., 2020). Some modifications were aimed at short-term improvement of communication, while others were aimed at creating a better environment for productive and meaningful discussion where diversity is appreciated.

Drawing on the specific case, this paper will first introduce the context of the exchange and its objectives. Then, the project design and modifications will be described, highlighting how they improved the overall project. The discussion section will provide reflections on the importance of project design and modifications, followed by a conclusion with some pedagogical implications COIL practitioners may find useful.

2. Context

The Momiji Project is an annual Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project implemented in the Sustainability Studies course at a university in Japan (JPU) and the Intermediate-Advanced Japanese at a university in the Southeast U.S. (AMU). The title momiji, a Japanese word for
Japanese maple that turns red in fall, denotes the season where the project is conducted (i.e., fall) and is used as a convenient reference to the rather complex project.

The JPU course focuses on the topic of linguistic and cultural diversity in a global workplace and is taught in English. Typically, 30 to 40 juniors and seniors in the Department of Global Liberal Studies take the course as an elective, and the Momiji Project comprises 35% of the course grade. Most JPU students are native speakers of Japanese, while 5 to 10% are nonnative speakers whose Japanese proficiency ranges from low-advanced to high-advanced.

The AMU course is a fifth-semester Japanese language course taught in Japanese. Most AMU students are Japanese minors or East Asian Studies majors, some of which have studied abroad in Japan or plan to in their plan of study. Typically, AMU students are native speakers of English, while there have been nonnative English speakers. The project comprises 8 to 10% of the course grade.

The proportional imbalance of the project grade between JPU (35%) and AMU (8 to 10%) derives from the nature of the courses and their objectives; the JPU course has enough room to design its activities and assignments based on the COIL materials and discussions, while the AMU course has little flexibility due to the preexisting activities and assignments for students to achieve intermediate-advanced proficiency in Japanese.

3. Objectives

VE, including COIL, can offer benefits such as versatility, accessibility, and economic and environmental sustainability (Gutiérrez & O’Dowd, 2021), which is evident in the increased popularity in various fields (Rubin, 2019). The recent interruption of global mobility caused by a global pandemic encouraged higher education institutions to engage in such innovative educational practices.

One particularly popular model of COIL designed for language learning is a tandem language exchange model where VE is employed as a tool for communicative language practice through interaction with proficient speakers of the target language (O’Rourke, 2007). Despite the popularity of tandems, it has been pointed out that VE in a language learning context can result in a superficial discussion on differences, failing to achieve the level of development in terms of intercultural awareness as originally intended (Kramsch, 2014).
One of the challenges in the preparation process is how to make a COIL project effective for the collaborating courses if they come from different academic disciplines, for example, if a language course is centered around developing certain skills, while an academic course focuses on enriching critical thinking skills on the essential concept of the discipline. In order to benefit students of both courses, the instructors set the project objectives through multiple planning consultations which have been reviewed every year.

The most recent objectives state that students will be able (1) to enrich their understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity in the globalized world, (2) to practice communicative skills and exchange ideas in the target language, (3) to express opinions through writing in the target language, and (4) to critically reflect on the COIL exchanges to nurture global competence. These objectives are identical to the objectives of the JPU course, as COIL is a major component of the JPU course. They are also related to AMU’s course objectives of developing communicative skills in Japanese including sociocultural competencies.

4. Project design

There are two types of activities, (1) JPU-centered, English-based activities and (2) AMU-centered, Japanese based activities, which take place concurrently in the six-week collaboration. While all students take part in both, there are some institution-specific activities. Some activities are on a weekly basis, while others take place at different intervals. Some are individual activities, while others are conducted in the transpacific COIL groups. Canvas, a learning management system, is used as the hub where project materials are shared, and assignments are submitted and graded.

Prior to the collaboration, students are divided into groups, usually one AMU student and two or three JPU students. Then, institution-specific orientations are offered, followed by a joint one via Zoom. The joint orientation has been effective in breaking the ice, leading to a more relaxed environment suited for productive discussions. Both JPU and AMU students are required to submit weekly journals to reflect on their individual performances as well as the collaborative activities in English. This helps instructors track student progress and identify any issues that need to be addressed immediately or in the long run.

From an ethical standpoint, students are guided through project instructions and ethical considerations during the orientation. Students are also asked to sign a consent form to participate in the study as well as a material release form to each school to use photos for promotional purposes.
4.1. JPU-centered, English-based activities

The JPU-centered activities are conducted in English and comprise (1) reading assignments, (2) discussion posts, (3) discussion meetings, and (4) two reflection papers. Both JPU and AMU students are assigned to complete (1) through (3), while the reflection papers are only assigned to JPU students. Both JPU and AMU students first read an assigned chapter of the textbook about the globalized workplace in Japan and make a post on Canvas. Each post must include their favorite quotes with a reason why they selected them, as well as at least three discussion questions. Each student is responsible for posting their own and reading other group members’ posts in preparation for discussion meetings.

Some discussions are directly related to the readings (e.g., “Many argued that mandated Englishnization might lead to the gradual loss of Japanese values. Do you agree with such an argument? Why or why not?”; “What do you think is the best solution to make linguistic expats feel like they are included?”). On the other hand, many students also ask reflective questions to discuss personal experiences and opinions (e.g., “What do you think is important when we learn a new language?”; “How can we adapt to a new environment while securing our own identity?”).

Discussion meetings occur synchronously via Zoom, facilitated by the instructors where students engage in group discussions for about 45 minutes. Then, the instructors shuffle the groups to allow shorter discussion sessions with different students. At the end of the meeting, each COIL group shares the highlight of their discussion with their classmates and the instructors. This cycle is repeated four times during the six-week collaboration.

There are two reflection papers for JPU students to write in English, one in the middle of the collaboration and the other after. The major points for reflection are new and interesting findings, U.S.-Japan comparisons around the topics discussed, and overall reflection on the collaboration. In addition, JPU students have in-class reflective discussions on the overall collaboration.

4.2. AMU-centered, Japanese-based activities

The AMU-centered activities are conducted in Japanese and consist of (1) discussion questions, (2) discussion meetings in COIL groups, and (3) a two-draft essay. AMU students are required to do all three, while JPU students only take part in the discussion meetings. First, each AMU student selects a cultural topic (e.g., commuting to school versus living in a dorm, part-time jobs, extracurricular activities) and create discussion questions based on them. Then they arrange and conduct a Zoom
meeting in each group and submit the recording before the designated deadline. Group members communicate using a messaging app called LINE, not only to arrange meetings but also to engage in follow-up discussions as well as casual interactions. Each discussion period lasts for two weeks, and there are two discussion periods, meaning each AMU student gets to discuss two main topics of their preference about Japanese culture.

After the discussion sessions, each AMU student writes a two-draft essay on one of the topics they selected. It is a guided process of choosing a topic, creating an outline, writing a first draft, and making revisions, and writing a second draft. There are individual meetings in the revision process to offer each student the necessary help as well as to reflect on the collaboration as a whole.

4.3. Modifications

Several modifications have been made for improvements over the years. First, students are made more aware of the expected division of labor in the English discussion sessions. During the first discussion session in 2019, many JPU students focused on asking the questions they prepared with little effort to expand the discussion. The superficial interactions focused on Q&A did not lead to an in-depth discussion of the topic and some AMU students felt unsatisfied. In addition, JPU students tended to create a clear boundary between the U.S. and Japan, as if the JPU group is monolithic. The tendency was evident to the instructors in observing small-group discussions where some JPU students discussed among themselves in Japanese and formed one general opinion before sharing it in English with their AMU partners. Not only did the “us versus them” mentality diminish diversity within the same social category, but it also created an uneven contribution from JPU students; an AMU student would contribute 50% of the discussion, while two or three JPU students in the group would divide the remaining 50% among them, letting the “Japanese representative” talk in turn and the others remained silent, meaning each JPU student contributes 13 to 25% of the discussion at best.

Immediately after the first session, the instructors created a guideline for active discussion, highlighting the importance of diversity and balanced contribution. After the guideline was shared, the manner of English discussion sessions improved regarding intergroup diversity and allowed more active participation from JPU students. Some JPU students noted an increased level of participation (e.g., “I was able to talk more about my own experiences and opinions this time”). During the post-project interview, some AMU students also mentioned how the dynamics of the sessions changed for the better (e.g., “my partners became more talkative, and I didn’t have to be talking all the time”).
Secondly, the number of English discussion meetings was increased after the first Momiji Project. In 2019, there were two discussion sessions, and two major factors led the instructors to reconsider the number of virtual sessions: (1) the importance of rapport building and (2) student responses (Nishio et al., 2020). While the orientation was intended to break the ice, some students were nervous in discussing academic and/or cultural topics in the target language with native/advanced-level speakers. For example, instructors’ observations suggest that many students were answering the prepared questions briefly rather than drawing on personal experiences and opinions. Moreover, many students mentioned in the journal that they wished there were more sessions because it took some time to break the ice and open up to the partners.

Building rapport, or developing a connection and understanding with someone, becomes more critical when one is engaged in intercultural communication, not only for avoiding misunderstanding but also for being able to express themselves. As the instructors reflected on the first Momiji Project upon completion, it was decided to extend the length of collaboration from five to six weeks, increase the number of English discussion meetings from two to three times, and allow more time for discussions in Japanese. It is still true that rapport building can take time, but the extension increased the number of meaningful discussions in the overall project. Some AMU students acknowledged an initial difficulty to have in-depth discussion because they were “getting to know each other back then,” but “it became much easier over time.” Moreover, some journal entries and the overall quality of post-project reflection papers indicated the depth of discussion, suggesting a possible influence of the modification.

Another modification recently added to the English discussion is shuffling groups several times per session. Each COIL group was not as diverse because it only had one AMU student due to the imbalance in the number of students. Even after JPU students’ contribution improved and more intragroup diversity was valued after the additional guidance described above, AMU students remained a U.S. representative in a way. In 2019, one AMU student mentioned during the post-project interview, “sometimes it worries me that my JPU partners would think what I tell them applies to everyone in the States, because it doesn’t.”

To offer students opportunities to be exposed to various views on the topics, the instructors started to shuffle groups in each meeting. According to a brief survey during the Zoom session, both JPU and AMU students liked shuffled groups over staying in the same group for the entire meeting (e.g., “I enjoyed meeting various students with different opinions”). Some JPU students noted in their reflection papers that the U.S. is diverse, and there were various opinions. To many AMU students, this modification took off the burden of being the U.S. representative, as one AMU student mentioned
in the post-project interview that “I was relieved that I could speak for myself instead of making general statements.”

### 5. Discussion

Kramsch (2014) argues that VE in foreign language education has seen a greater shallowness of content compared to the traditional classroom setting. In the context of the Momiji Project, there was a greater possibility that English discussion would result in a surface-level interaction, downplaying cultural difference (Kramsch, 2014) due to the Q&A approach some JPU students initially adopted. For JPU students, group discussions are something they never encounter in their education system, and quantity is valued over quality when completing a task. These cultural and collective historical factors (Thorne, 2003) seemed to prevent them from engaging in in-depth discussion. A JPU student reflected, “I thought we had to ask all the questions we prepared, so we just took turns and asked our questions before time was up.” On the other hand, an AMU student recalled, “at first, the JPU students in my group seemed to want straight answers for their questions, and it was really hard to give them what they wanted, because my answers would be much more complex and I needed to explain.” Although the instructors had provided tips for effective discussions during the institution-specific and joint orientations, it was not enough for some JPU students, and it was critical to offer additional guidance with specific examples. It allowed students to engage in the discussion for deeper intercultural understanding as well as greater appreciation of intragroup diversity.

It is essential for successful interaction that each participant ensures meaning is shared, and knowing the languages and cultures of the participants does not automatically translate into a meaningful dialogue (Vinagre & Corral Esteban, 2018). Establishing rapport between group members is critical to allow them to engage in fruitful dialogues in both in-person and virtual settings, especially in intercultural communication, as noted in various studies on VE (Salomão & Viana da Silva, 2020; Brighton, 2020; Ganassin et al., 2021). The Momiji Project also corroborates these findings and shows the importance of rapport building through a higher satisfaction rate on the depth of discussion category by students in recent years, compared to the first year when students had fewer English discussion meetings and shorter discussion periods for Japanese communication. It is also suggested that JPU students’ switching from the Q&A approach to the dialogic style intersected with the increased rapport building, leading to the positive reflections of recent Momiji Projects.

While meeting with the same group members repeatedly is essential for rapport building, it might narrow down student views and potentially lead to reinforcing preexisting stereotypes or creating
new ones if not carried out with care (Godwin-Jones, 2019). To avoid the pitfall, the instructors have stressed the danger of generalization to students before engaging in intercultural communication since the first implementation of the Momiji Project. However, the imbalance of student numbers has posed a challenge to AMU students. One AMU student reported during an individual interview after the project, “I had to be extra careful not to make my opinion sound like the one that represents Americans.” Yet, some reflection papers by JPU students showed some examples of generalization: “my partner said Americans value diversity ...,” “American college students must learn a foreign language ...”. The shift to shuffling groups during a session allowed students to get exposed to various experiences and opinions and yielded fewer generalizations by JPU students. This also intersected with JPU students’ shift to the dialogic approach, which allowed them to tell individual stories rather than a collective one per topic, diversifying the opinions shared within each group even further.

6. Conclusions

This practice report aimed to stress the importance of project design to offer effective learning environments and means to students, by describing multiple modifications to the annual COIL project. As O’Dowd (2020) argues, echoing Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), educators who engage in VE should carefully approach how it is “structured and integrated into formal education to develop rich and productive learning experiences” (p. 478). It is critical to provide an environment that allows for in-depth and diverse exchange of perspectives instead of superficial discussion. In doing so, flexibility is key to success for both students and educators along with other factors, as highlighted by numerous studies on VE and guidelines for COIL (Brighton, 2020; Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O’Dowd, 2021). In the context of the Momiji Project, the original project design was dynamically modified for both immediate effects and long-term improvements.

The past modifications do not guarantee future success due to the dynamism of various factors of a VE project. What worked once may not work with a new cohort, as it comprises new students from various backgrounds. We should also pay attention to the effectiveness of a project in terms of individual differences as well as intragroup variety. What is effective for a student may not be for others, and the same procedure may work for some groups but not for others. While it may not be possible to achieve perfection, educators who engage in VE should remember the dynamic nature of VE and make modifications for improvement.

It is also suggested student voices be heard and their performances be carefully observed. There are typically many components of a VE project not directly supervised by the educators, which may
make it hard for them to identify for modification. While complete supervision or observation is impractical, reflective tasks such as journals, in-class reflections, and individual interviews allow educators to gauge the effectiveness of the project and reevaluate it for potential modifications. Keeping a critical stance on the project design through multiple lenses should help educators to pursue effective teaching and learning in the intercultural, virtual environment.

References


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ISSN: 2647-4832 (online only)