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Creating opportunities for cross-border interaction: Insights from a synchronous Japan–Taiwan virtual exchange

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In recent years, virtual exchanges (VEs) have gained popularity due to their numerous benefits such as encouraging student autonomy and motivation, cross-border interaction, and intercultural learning experiences. This shift has been driven by increasing globalization, advances in communication technology, and travel restrictions during the pandemic. Despite the desire to conduct online exchanges, differing schedules, time zones, and institutional requirements do not always permit instructors to include them as part of their class activities. The Japan–Taiwan virtual exchange described in this article is an example of how a synchronous VE can be implemented effectively in a short time frame to offer students the opportunity to practice language skills and gain experience communicating internationally. This article briefly discusses the design and implementation of a short-term VE between students in Japan and Taiwan, highlighting the benefits and challenges faced. Following the description and discussion of the exchange, avenues for improvement are suggested.

Keywords: virtual exchange, cross-cultural communication, intercultural learning

Introduction

Virtual exchanges (VEs) are increasingly recognized as valuable for promoting student autonomy, motivation, cross-border interaction, and intercultural learning

experiences (Flowers et al., 2019; Skidmore, 2023). They overcome geographical barriers and provide diverse formats for engaging students in international and intercultural dialogues, supporting the development of crucial skills like intercultural competence and digital literacy (Flowers et al., 2019; O'Dowd, 2021; Skidmore, 2023). While VEs face limitations, such as a perceived lack of authenticity compared to in-person interactions (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022), they still offer meaningful opportunities for practicing intercultural communication and language skills. Various formats, including synchronous and asynchronous interactions, help participants connect despite time zone differences and cultural barriers (Akiyama, 2017).

Even though VEs are generally considered as beneficial, concerns have been raised about the authenticity and depth of VEs compared to in-person experiences. Issues such as potential miscommunication and the effectiveness of acquiring intercultural competence have also been debated (Flowers et al., 2019). While short-term exchanges may limit the scope of interaction, evidence suggests they can still foster intercultural understanding (Choi & Choi, 2020). Given the constraints faced by educators with regards to scheduling and institutional and curriculum constraints, implementing short-term synchronous VEs can provide valuable learning opportunities for students (Kelsen et al., 2024).

Notwithstanding the challenges and limitations presented by short-term VEs, we (i.e., the three instructors who implemented this program) decided running a VE was potentially worthwhile and would offer an opportunity for our students to engage in communication with peers in a different country. As a result, the Japan-Taiwan workshop was a synchronous VE conducted over two consecutive days, with each session lasting 2 hours. It aimed to provide students with authentic language practice, intercultural engagement, and acted as a testbed for future short-term exchanges. This model offers a flexible alternative to long-term exchanges, which are often difficult to organize due to conflicting schedules, time zones, and institutional requirements.

Design and participant overview

The Japan-Taiwan virtual exchange workshop was facilitated by three instructors with experience in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from three institutions – two in Japan and one in Taiwan. It included 14 students who spoke either Japanese or Chinese as their first language – seven from Japan (female=5, male=2) and seven from Taiwan (female=4, male=3) – studying in various disciplines such as humanities, science, and technology. The exchange was approved by the respective universities. Students willing and able to communicate in English were recruited through word of mouth, social media, or university learning management systems and participated in the exchange voluntarily. The workshop was hosted on the Zoom videoconferencing platform consisting of two 2-hour sessions. All communication was conducted in English, with student proficiency levels estimated to range from CEFR B2-C1.

Prior to the exchange, each of us contacted the student volunteers either online or in person to advise them on general details of the VE and pre-exchange preparation such as topic selection. The exchange consisted of two sessions: the first focused on cultural presentations, and the second on academic topics. On day 1, students from

each country presented cultural elements such as local foods, dialects, and regional traditions. Day 2 shifted to academic discussions, with presentations on topics like psychology, data science, animal therapy, and English linguistics. Both sessions included interactive Q&A segments, encouraging dialogue and active participation. Each day finished with a general discussion predominantly led by students' interest in knowing more about each other. Table 1 shows the exchange schedule. For further details, please see Kelsen et al. (2024).

Table 1. Japan–Taiwan short-term VE workshop schedule

Session 1	Activity	Activity examples
NTPU	Student presentations (approx. 3–5 minutes/student)	Local languages (Mandarin/Taiwanese), local historical site and food (SanXia Old Street and croissant), NTPU guitar club
	Q&A session (approx. 10 minutes total)	
Hirosaki Uni.	Student presentations (approx. 3–5 minutes/student)	Summer festival (Neputa Festival), Aomori apples, local language (Tsugaru dialect)
	Q&A session (approx. 10 minutes total)	
Tohoku Uni.	Student presentations (approx. 3–5 minutes/student)	Local food and drinks (beef tongue and beef noodles)
	Q&A session (approx. 10 minutes total)	
	Group discussion	
Session 2	Activity	Activity examples
Hirosaki Uni.	Student presentations (approx. 3–5 minutes/student)	Psychology (animal therapy), British Literature (Sherlock Holmes), English Linguistics
	Q&A session (approx. 10 minutes total)	
Tohoku Uni.	Student presentations (approx. 3–5 minutes/student)	Politics and law, second language acquisition
	Q&A session (approx. 10 minutes total)	
NTPU	Student presentations (approx. 3–5 minutes/student)	Communication Engineering Department student life, studying statistics, internship experience
	Q&A session (approx. 10 minutes total)	
	Group discussion (approx. 10 minutes total)	

NTPU=National Taipei University.

Thoughts on the value of the exchange

Despite the short duration, instructor observations and anecdotal student reflections showed that the Japan–Taiwan workshop successfully offered the opportunity for meaningful intercultural communication and increased participants' curiosity and motivation to engage in cross-cultural interactions. As noted by several studies, virtual exchanges allow students to engage in authentic communication that is otherwise limited in their home institutions (Flowers et al., 2019). In this case, the Japanese students – who typically have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom – benefited from interacting with peers from Taiwan in a real-world setting, challenging them to apply their language skills.

From a pedagogical perspective, the workshop succeeded in creating a low-pressure environment where students could build their confidence in using English.

Several participants indicated that it was their first experience presenting academic topics in English to an international audience. This kind of exposure has been seen to enhance motivation by creating a sense of value and connection through enagaging with peers in an exchange (Flowers et al., 2019; Skidmore, 2023). Additionally, the Taiwanese students expressed a keen interest in learning more about the cultural and regional diversity of Japan, which had previously been unfamiliar to them and emerged as a key driver of curiosity for them to participate in the workshop.

While traditional classroom settings often focus on academic achievement, the workshop allowed students to take an active role in constructing their learning environment through peer interaction and self-guided presentations (Akiyama, 2017). This shift from a teacher-led environment to a more student-centered approach contributed to a deeper learning experience. Nevertheless, this arose as a clear avenue for further development in future exchanges.

Challenges and areas for improvement

Although the Japan–Taiwan workshop achieved its objectives, several challenges arose that limited the depth of student interaction. While students engaged in discussions during the Q&A sessions, there were no collaborative tasks that required them to work together across borders. As a result, the exchange did not fully take advantage of the potential for co-constructed learning or collaborative project outputs. Future exchanges could enhance student engagement by incorporating projects that require collaboration across different contexts, such as a collaborative online international learning (COIL) exchange.

Recruitment also posed a challenge for one instructor. Participation was voluntary, thus making it difficult to find students to join. In contrast, Taiwanese students appeared more readily available, perhaps due to differing academic schedules or intrinsic motivations. To address this issue, future VEs could be more closely integrated into curriculums or offer formal recognition such as course credit to increase student participation.

Another challenge was the absence of a formal assessment mechanism to evaluate the development of language usage or intercultural competence. While students reported positive experiences during debriefing and informal reflections following the exchange, the workshop did not include structured methods to measure learning outcomes, such as pre-and post-surveys or peer assessments. As intercultural competence requires time to develop, longitudinal studies are recommended to better understand the long-term impacts of such exchanges (Skidmore, 2023).

Future directions and suggestions for VEs

The Japan–Taiwan exchange demonstrated the potential of short-term VEs to provide meaningful intercultural learning experiences within a limited timeframe. However, this experience suggests several modifications to enhance future exchanges:

1. Collaborative projects: Incorporating collaborative tasks, such as joint presentations or group discussions, would allow students to engage in more profound intercultural learning. This would also simulate real-world cross-cultural

teamwork, which is becoming increasingly important in globalized workplaces (O'Dowd, 2020).

2. Assessment and feedback: To gauge the effectiveness of VEs, future exchanges could include structured assessments, such as intercultural competence scales or reflective journals (Flowers et al., 2019). These tools can provide valuable data for instructors and help identify areas for improvement.
3. Curriculum integration: Embedding VEs into existing course structures would provide a stronger incentive for students to participate (Flowers et al., 2019). Offering course credit or aligning VEs with course learning outcomes might ensure that students see the value of their participation.
4. Instructor collaboration and support: The role of instructors in planning and facilitating VEs is crucial. Future exchanges could benefit from offering more opportunities for professional development and collaboration among educators, enabling them to share experiences, best practices, and refine their approach to VE facilitation (Rubin & Guth, 2022).
5. Blended synchronous and asynchronous models: Incorporating asynchronous elements into the exchange, such as discussion boards or video presentations, would allow students to engage more flexibly given varying schedules. This would also give students more time to reflect on the materials and prepare their contributions thoughtfully.

Conclusion

The Japan–Taiwan virtual exchange workshop offers a model for how short-term VEs can be implemented to foster intercultural engagement and language development. While there are challenges to be addressed, such as the need for deeper collaboration and more robust assessment tools and feedback channels, we believe the benefits conveyed through positive feedback and reflection warrant adapting and conducting future exchanges. As educational institutions continue to embrace digital platforms and global collaboration, VE workshops will play an important role in preparing students for an increasingly interconnected world. The experience gained from this exchange provides a foundation for future workshops, which can be expanded to include more diverse participants and academic disciplines. By addressing the challenges identified, educators can refine their exchange approaches and ensure that students gain the maximum benefit from these learning experiences.

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