

Digital Sojourn: Empowering Learners Through English as a Lingua Franca

Simeon D. Flowers

Aoyama Gakuin University

Brent A. Kelsen

National Taipei University

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Our current technological landscape provides us with new frontiers in learner development. Authentic intercultural experiences can be supported in the classroom using a variety of rich multimedia tools and methods that are quite accessible to both learner and educator. In this study, 2 researchers from Japan and Taiwan collaborated to engage their learners in online exchange. Participants communicated using English as their lingua franca. Digital sojourn was supported in this exchange through a combination of interdependent learning, multimodal communication, and guided reflection. Results confirmed the importance of reflection and showed the potential for digital sojourn to support grassroots-level bridge building.

現在のテクノロジー環境は学習者デベロップメントのための新たな場を提供している。学習者と教育者の両方にアクセス可能で豊富なマルチメディア・ツールと、様々な方法を使い、教室内で本物の異文化体験を提供している。本研究では、日本と台湾の2人の研究者が協力し、学習者がインターネットを活用した異文化交流を行った。学習者たちは、共通語として英語を使用しコミュニケーションを行った。デジタル滞在 (digital sojourn) はこの交流において、相互依存的な学習、マルチモーダル・コミュニケーション、および誘導的熟考の組み合わせを通して支持された。結果、熟考の重要性を確認し、草の根レベルでの橋渡しを支えるデジタル滞在の可能性を示した。

It is estimated that less than one in three English users are native speakers (Crystal, 2003); the majority use English as their second language. English is no longer a tool of cultural imperialism. Rather, it is the shared lingua franca by which the world communi-

cates (Jenkins, 2009). In Japan this change can be seen in the new direction the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has taken with regard to exchange programs, stating that interuniversity exchanges between Japan and her East Asian neighbors are key to the future of Japan (MEXT, 2010). This paper explores one such exchange, a *digital sojourn* between Japan and Taiwan.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

MEXT's (2010) shift from a focus on the West to a focus on bridge building between Japan and East Asian countries clarifies the need for a new approach to language education in Japan. The English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) approach focuses on the intercultural development of the learner and on empowering learners towards a sense of their mutual ownership of English (Jenkins, 2009).

Towards Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Developing ELF communication is part and parcel to developing intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Hülmbauer, Böhringer, & Seidlhofer, 2008; Jenkins, 2009). In developing ICC, extensive grassroots experience is highly valued (Byram, 1997; Hammer, Bennet, & Wiseman, 2003; Harris & Young, 2009). According to MEXT (2010), authentic intercultural experience is fundamental to developing Japan's much needed global human resources. However, Japan has seen a general decline in enrollment in overseas study programs since its height in 2004. Yonezawa (2014) attributed this to many factors including economic issues and the "oversupply" of domestic higher education opportunities due to a declining birthrate (p. 45).

Byram (1997) associated sojourn, rather than tourism, with the development of ICC: "Although tourism has had major economic consequences, it is the sojourner who produces effects on a society which challenge its unquestioned and unconscious beliefs,

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behaviors and meaning, and whose own beliefs, behaviors and meaning are in turn challenged and expected to change” (p. 1).

However, where such long-term and immersive experiences are implausible, online exchanges can engage learners in positive intercultural development. For example, Flowers (2015) described the interaction between university students from Japan and high school students from the United States who were paired in online pen pal exchange, resulting in increases in confidence and decreases in ethnocentricity among the Japanese participants. In another study, Forsythe (2014) engaged Japanese university students in online telecollaboration with university students in the United States in the creation of culturally themed wiki articles. However, to what extent these online exchanges are simply cases of online tourism or examples of a true digital sojourn remains unclear.

Digital Sojourn

In honor of Byram’s (1997) description of the sojourner, we have coined the phrase *digital sojourn* to refer to a life-changing virtual journey. In order to go beyond online tourism, three unique factors are important to digital sojourn: (a) interdependence, (b) technological support for multimodal communication, and (c) guided reflection.

Interdependence

Interdependent learning is a central theme in collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1999; Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005), computer-supported collaborative learning (Stahl, Koschmann, & Suthers, 2006), and telecollaborative learning (O’Dowd, 2012). O’Dowd (2012) emphasized the value of telecollaboration in language learning, particularly as it contributes to the development of ICC. Key to this development is support for social interaction, seen as the catalyst fueling both the cognitive processes and the socio-emotional process of learning, as shown in Figure 1.

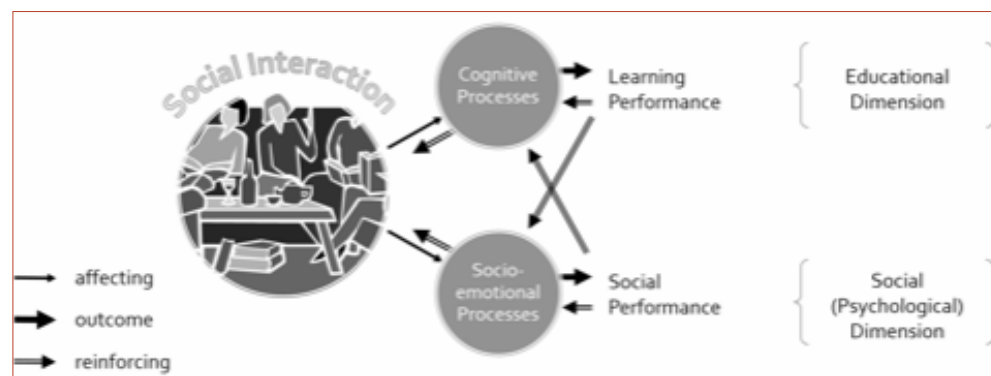


Figure 1. The two dimensions of collaborative learning. Adapted with permission from Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003.

Technological Support for Multimodal Communication

According to Mallia (2014), smartphones and social networking services (SNSs) provide more support for social interaction than traditional learning management systems (LMSs). This is no surprise considering that SNS apps were designed specifically for social interaction. One of the key benefits to the smartphone-SNS combination is a high level of support for multimodal communication (O’Dowd, 2013), such as text, images, links, and video. Additionally, emoticons and the “like” button simulate smiles and nods of agreement (Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016). Furthermore, the smartphone-SNS app combination offers more modes for communication in terms of the time and place of the interaction (Okazaki & Mendez, 2013). And finally, the smartphone-SNS combination supports the sharing of personal content (Good, 2012). Smartphone adoption among Japanese university students is near 100% (Cote, Milliner, Flowers, & Ferreira, 2014); therefore, smartphone-based telecollaboration using SNSs provides more support for multimodal communication than that of fixed terminal telecollaboration using a traditional LMS.

Reflection

Reflection is a key element in experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and several studies have shown its importance in facilitating ICC. Pedersen (2009), for instance, compared groups of students who had studied abroad and discovered that those who engaged in reflection developed ICC to a much greater extent than those who did not. Hammer (2012) also made similar conclusions, identifying the significant improvement mentoring and reflec-

tion have on ICC over experience alone. However, as of this date we know of no other studies investigating these issues in cases of online intercultural exchange.

Research Questions

- RQ1. Will an SNS-based Japan-Taiwan digital sojourn support the development of English as a lingua franca?
- RQ2. Do reflective activities make a significant difference in intercultural development, even in cases of online exchange?
- RQ3. Will a Japan-Taiwan digital sojourn contribute to grassroots bridge building between these two Asian neighbors?

Method

Participants

In this study, two parallel classes in Japan and two parallel classes in Taiwan were chosen as classes of interest. One class from each country was randomly selected to be a test group (T1 and T2), and the other from each country acted as the control group (C1 and C2). Participant demographics are in Table 1. The test and control groups in each country attended identical class sessions. The test groups consisted of 28 students from Japan and 30 students from Taiwan. The students in Japan had average TOEFL scores of approximately 500; those in Taiwan had average TOEIC scores of approximately 700, indicating both groups had the language proficiency to communicate effectively in the lingua franca.

Table 1. Participants in This Study (N = 107)

Demographic	Control groups		Test groups	
	C1 (Taiwan)	C2 (Japan)	T1 (Taiwan)	T2 (Japan)
<i>n</i>	28	28	28	23
Major	Mixed	International communication	Mixed	International politics
Age	18-22	18-19	18-22	18-19
CEFR level	B2-C1	B1-B2	B2-C1	B1-B2

Note. *n* includes only those students who responded to both the pretest and posttest ISS questionnaire.

Procedure

Before the exchange all participants were given the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) survey. Test group participants were then engaged in 8 weeks of online intercultural exchange in addition to their regular study; the two control groups were engaged in only their regular study. Control groups were used in order to isolate the effect of the exchange as opposed to the effect of interacting with a foreign teacher in an English classroom. The intercultural exchange was done using Facebook. Eight Facebook groups were created and three to four students from Taiwan (from T1) and three to four students from Japan (from T2) were put into into each Facebook group.

Each week, the instructors initiated conversation on a new topic among the exchange participants by providing model posts that acted as prompts for that week's topic. Figure 2 is an example. Informal topics such as food culture and music were chosen by the instructors as icebreakers to facilitate the exchange.

In addition to the online exchange, Japanese test group participants were also engaged in classroom-based reflective activities concerning the exchange. T1 and T2 were given slightly different treatments in this study, so as to test the effect of reflective activities over experience alone on intercultural development in online exchange. Participation in the exchange was entirely voluntary for test group participants. However, as the Japanese test group participants were given a series of classroom-based reflective activities, there was some pressure to participate in the exchange.

After the exchange, all participants were given the ISS again. Randomly chosen participants of the test groups from both Taiwan and Japan were also given post-exchange interviews to gather qualitative feedback. These interviews focused on students' views about the English language, intercultural development, and how the exchange could be improved. A summary of these procedures can be found in Table 2.

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Figure 2. Teacher post (left) followed by a student post (right) showing modeling.

Instruments

The following instruments were used to gauge involvement with the project, to measure intercultural development, and to collect data for qualitative assessment.

1. Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS): a 24-item 5-factor self-report instrument devel-

oped by Chen and Starosta (2000). This instrument measures (a) interaction engagement; (b) respect for cultural differences; (c) interaction confidence; (d) interaction enjoyment; and (e) interaction attentiveness.

2. The Facebook participation rubric (FPR): An original rubric on a scale of 1 to 10 developed during this study (Appendix A).
3. Semistructured interview questions (Appendix B).
4. Content from the Facebook exchange collected using Netvizz.

Table 2. Summary of Procedures

Week	Taiwan		Japan		
	C1 and T1	only T1	C2 and T2	only T2	
Pre	ISS	Facebook exchange	ISS	Facebook exchange	Classroom reflection
1	English Elective	Introductions	Required English	Intro- ductions	Discussion of exchange and its purpose
2	English Elective	Food	Required English	Food	Goal setting for the exchange
3	English Elective	Music	Required English	Music	Discuss ways to make the exchange better
4	English Elective	Movies / anime	Required English	Movies / anime	Read and comment on posts during class
5	English Elective	Sightseeing spots	Required English	Sightsee- ing spots	Mid-exchange reflective presentations: partner class personalities
6	English Elective	Celebrities	Required English	Celebri- ties	Read and comment on posts during class
7	English Elective	Free topic	Required English	Free topic	Ask partner class a "burning question"
8	English Elective	Goodbyes	Required English	Good- byes	Formal reflective presentations concerning the exchange (n = 20)

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Week	Taiwan		Japan	
	C1 and T1	only T1	C2 and T2	only T2
Post	ISS	FPR Semistruc- tured inter- views (n = 12)	ISS	FPR Semis- tructured interviews (n = 6)

Note. C1 and C2 were control groups; T1 and T2 were test groups; ISS = Intercultural Sensitivity Scale; FPR = Facebook participation rubric.

Analysis

The FPR was used to rate each participant's level of involvement in the exchange. Responses to the semistructured interviews were transcribed and examined for major trends. They were then summarized into succinct representations of the most common responses given by the participants interviewed. Development of intercultural sensitivity was analyzed through a linear study of the ISS results. Changes between the pre-exchange and post-exchange implementations of the ISS instrument were first calculated; changes to each test group were then compared with changes to their respective control groups using Student's *t* test for significance and Cohen's *d* for effect size.

Results

A total of 290 posts were shared among participants. These included 94 photographs and 77 videos. In addition, there were 315 replies to posts and a total of 1,196 "likes." A word count revealed the exchange of 15,014 words by participants with approximately 15% of this content being attributed to teacher modeling and participation in the exchange. Using the FPR we found that the Japanese participants ($M = 8.4, SD = 1.5$) were more involved in the exchange than the Taiwanese participants ($M = 4.9, SD = 3.3$) with the condition ($p < .001$). The only statistically significant effect on intercultural sensitivity as measured through the ISS questionnaire was found among the Japanese test group participants in the area of *Respect for cultural differences* ($t(52) = 2.73, p < .01, d = 0.7$). The test results are in presented in Table 3 and Figure 3.

Table 3. Changes in Intercultural Sensitivity Scale Scores, All Participants

Factor	Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Interaction engagement	C1	28	0.8	2.7	0.35	.727	0.1
	T1	28	1.1	2.6			
	C2	28	-0.1	2.2	0.13	.894	0.0
T2	23	-0.1	0.4				
Respect for cultural differences	C1	28	0.3	3.7	0.80	.425	0.2
	T1	28	1.0	2.5			
	C2	28	0.1	2.5	2.73	.009	0.7
T2	23	1.6	1.2				
Interaction confidence	C1	28	0.5	3.0	0.55	.585	0.1
	T1	28	0.9	2.3			
	C2	28	-0.4	3.6	-0.41	.684	-0.1
T2	23	-0.7	1.3				
Interaction enjoyment	C1	28	1.4	1.7	0.83	.408	0.2
	T1	28	1.8	1.8			
	C2	28	0.8	2.1	0.11	.917	0.0
T2	23	0.9	0.5				
Interaction attentiveness	C1	28	0.1	1.5	1.08	.287	0.3
	T1	28	0.5	1.7			
	C2	28	0.0	1.1	-0.24	.815	-0.1
T2	23	-0.1	0.3				

Note. Control group 1 and test group 1 were in Taiwan; Control group 2 and test group 2 were in Japan.

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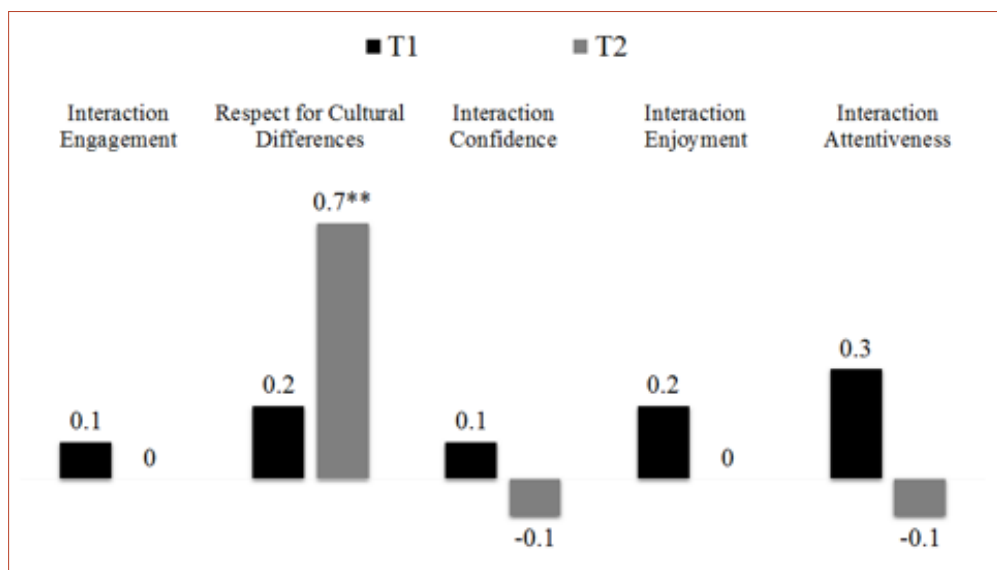


Figure 3. Effect on intercultural development of the test groups over their respective control groups as measured by Cohen's *d*. ** $p > .01$.

Themes Gleaned From Semistructured Interviews ($n = 18$)

The following themes represent an amalgamation of all students interviewed and the compression of over 4 hours of interview transcripts. The questions used to interview the subjects can be found in Appendix B.

English as a Lingua Franca

Many students felt like active members of the international community, but some felt they were too passive. Most of the students stated that they believed they were mutual owners of the English language. Most stated that the exchange increased their value of the English language as a tool for communication rather than just a subject for passing tests. The students who were more active in the exchange said they feel more fluent and more confident about their English use as a result of the exchange and that they really enjoyed the experience.

Importance of Intercultural Communication

Most participants felt intercultural communication is important to make the world a better place. Many Taiwanese participants were surprised to learn that their Japanese counterparts were open-minded and cared about Taiwan. The Taiwanese students specifically stated that they were surprised when the Japanese students showed concern about flooding that took place in Taiwan during the exchange. Most of the Japanese participants showed increased interest in learning about Taiwan and many came to understand that many Taiwanese students felt a strong sense of Taiwanese self-identity. Many of the Japanese participants expressed a desire to visit Taiwan in the future as a result of the exchange.

Improving the Exchange

Facebook proved to be a good medium for most students but some stated that it was somewhat unfamiliar to them. Most participants said that video conferencing using something like Skype would be a welcome addition to the exchange. Some Taiwanese students who did not participate much regretted it later and felt that more in-class opportunities or activities related to the exchange would have been welcome.

Poli-Sci Specific Reflections

A number of the student reflections revealed the specific benefit this exchange had for the international political science majors in Japan. A few of these reflections follow.

Question: How did you personally grow through the exchange?

I wanted to see Japan objectively, so I asked [the] question, "What images of Japan do Taiwanese have?". . . According to them, they think Japan is a traditional, innovative, and high quality country because of old structures, culture, nature, economy, and technology. However, some people hate Japan [due to] historical problems. This fact made me a little depressed, but one of the Taiwanese students mentioned [that] these problems can be resolved by communication and respect. I was amazed at his words and admired his thoughts, and then I realized [that] such exchange between younger generations [are] crucial to deepen mutual understanding. Therefore, I'll find opportunities that bring me to exchange with foreign people [again], and make efforts to comprehend each other. (Political science major, male, 19 years old, Japan)

Question: Do you see yourself as a member of the international community?

I last posted about the sunflower movement (you gave us a chance to post on a free topic). When I posted it, I shared it with other international political science students [in Japan]. When I posted it, I felt I can be a member of the international world. (Political science major, female, 19 years old, Japan)

Question: How has this exchange changed your view of Taiwan?

I though China and Taiwan were the same before, but now I can understand the differences between China and Taiwan. (Political science major, female, 18 years old, Japan)

Unexpected Results: A Visit from Taiwan

One of the unexpected results of this exchange was that two French exchange students from the class in Taiwan visited Japan and ended up spending 2 days with the Japanese students from the study. They met in Shibuya using Facebook Messenger to communicate. The Japanese students showed the visiting students inside Japanese culture such as *purikura* (photo booth) machines. In addition, they took the students to visit their campus. The Japanese students spent the next few weeks posting pictures about the visit to Facebook.

Discussion

Development of English as a Lingua Franca

Participants interviewed expressed feelings of empowerment after being able to communicate authentically in English. They came to see English beyond the confines of testing and assessment. Furthermore, they understood the value of intercultural development and were happy to have the opportunity for authentic intercultural experience. These qualitative results were confirmed by the ISS in which the Japanese participants experienced a significant increase in the factor *Respect for cultural differences* (see Figure 3). In addition, the majority of subjects interviewed in this study offered the suggestion that Skype chats should be included in the program. It is clear from this study that learners desire authentic intercultural encounters and that the majority of learners will participate voluntarily when such opportunities are provided.

Reflective Classroom Activities Important for Intercultural Development

Students in the Japanese test group engaged in a series of reflective activities regarding the exchange; the Taiwanese test group did not. Although the test group in Taiwan experienced slight increases in all areas of the ISS, none of the intercultural factors measured in this study showed significant increases over that of the control group in Taiwan. On the other hand, the Japanese test group participants experienced a significant increase in the intercultural factor *Respect for cultural differences* ($t(52) = 2.73, p < .01, d = 0.7$) over the control group in Japan.

Each test group was paired with a control group in the same country and school, with the same curriculum and instructor. This allowed the effects of the exchange to be isolated from other factors such as cultural differences or the teacher and curriculum differences between the two test groups. Therefore, the most substantial pedagogical difference between the two test groups is likely the inclusion of reflective activities conducted with the test group in Japan. The increased involvement and resulting intercultural development among students who engaged in reflective activities support the prevailing theory of intercultural development (Hammer, 2012; Pedersen, 2009) and extend that theory to the realm of online exchange.

Grassroots Bridge Building

Although the exchange was voluntary, the inclusion of weekly reflections in the test group in Japan provided both a challenge and an opportunity. The students who took advantage of this brought the exchange into the classroom through discussions and presentations that revealed the bridge-building nature of their interactions. During the exchange, participants spent a lot of time on easy and familiar topics like food and music but seemed to get a lot of enjoyment out of them as could be seen from the largely positive nature of the exchange. Some students even turned to more serious subjects, such as international politics. In at least one case, the students discussed the sensitive issue of Japan's colonial period, with the results of the discussion being positive and motivational. This example of grassroots reconciliation is not uncommon in such exchanges (see Harris & Young, 2009; Maoz, 2000). Furthermore, participants expressed the desire to visit each other's countries as a result of the online exchange, with at least one visit known to have occurred during the period of the exchange. The teachers provided opportunity for interaction, but it was the learners' voluntary engagement with the project that led to successful bridge building.

Conclusions

The digital sojourn presented in this study provided opportunity for authentic English use and supported the development of ICC. In addition, it empowered learners who participated towards an understanding of their mutual ownership of the English language. The project even seemed to initiate a certain level of bridge building among participants. Digital sojourn was supported in this project through three unique aspects of the experience: (a) an interdependent learning community, (b) multimodal communication, and (c) classroom-based reflection. We hope students will also spend some time in physical travel, but we believe digital sojourn can supplement a program intent on increasing intercultural competence and may help support MEXT's goal of fostering global human resources.

Bio Data

Simeon D. Flowers is an assistant professor at Tokai University and an adjunct professor at Aoyama Gakuin University. His research interests lie primarily in intercultural communication and social learning. He also enjoys film and teaches an amateur filmmaking course as a means to develop intercultural communication between Japanese students and international students at Tokai University. <flowers@tokai.ac.jp>

Brent A. Kelsen is a lecturer in the language center at National Taipei University, where he teaches in the ESP program. He is interested in research topics relating to business English, CALL, collaborative learning, and project-based learning. <brentntpu@gmail.com>

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Appendix A

Facebook Participation Rubric (FPR)

- 10 = Posted on all, commented and entered dialog on most, liked
- 9 = Posted on all, commented on some, liked
- 8 = Posted on some, commented and entered dialog on most, liked
- 7 = Posted on some, commented on some, liked
- 6 = Posted on one, commented and entered dialog on most, liked
- 5 = Posted on one, commented on some, liked
- 4 = Commented and liked many
- 3 = Commented and/or liked some
- 2 = Liked some
- 1 = Looked at some
- 0 = Didn't participate

Appendix B

Semistructured Interview Questions

- Why did you enroll in this course? Did this telecollaborative project help you achieve your goals?
- Do you believe intercultural knowledge/sensitivity is important? Why/Why not?
- Do you think the exchange with the students in Japan/Taiwan benefitted you intercultural knowledge? Why/why not?
- How did you feel about interacting/communicating via the internet? Was Facebook a good medium to use? Did you use any other platforms to communicate?
- How did you feel about communicating with students from another country? Did you learn anything from them? Do you think they learned anything from you?
- Are you interested in learning about Japanese/Taiwanese culture? Why/Why not?
- Did you feel peer pressure from your team members to join in exchange activities? Explain.
- What aspects of the exchange were good or bad? Why were they good/bad?
- Is there anything that you believe should be changed to make the exchange better? Explain.
- Do you have experience interacting with students from other cultures? Explain.
- Do you see yourself as a member of the international community? Why? Why not?
- What role do you see yourself playing in your country's connection to the rest of the world?
- What role did you play in the Japan/Taiwan exchange? (How did you participate, and why?)
- Who owns the English language? Explain. Have your thoughts on this changed as a result of this project? If so, how?
- Has your value for English study changed as a result of this exchange? If so, how.
- Has your view of yourself changed as a result of this exchange? If so, how?
- How has this exchange changed your view of Taiwan/Japan and Taiwanese people/Japanese people?