

Japan–Indonesia intercultural exchange in a Facebook Group

Facebook has become a worldwide phenomenon and is currently the most popular social networking service by worldwide active users. Being so widely used, its potential for use in intercultural exchanges is promising. However, as yet there is little discussion of how Facebook can best be used in an intercultural exchange. A valuable feature of Facebook is the ability to create a Facebook Group where instructors have control of membership, and where activities designed to encourage language learning and greater cultural awareness can be implemented. This paper will describe and evaluate an intercultural exchange between university students in Japan and Indonesia that took place during 2011. The exchange was found to be beneficial because students were able to learn about another culture while improving their English.

フェイスブックはすでに世界的に認知されており、現在のところ、世界中で実際に使用されるソーシャル・ネットワーク・サービス(SNS)としては、最もよく利用されている。このように広く使用されていることを考えれば、それを異文化間交流に利用できることは明らかである。しかし、どうすれば最も効果的にフェイスブックを異文化間交流に利用できるかと言う議論は、まだほとんどなされていない。フェイスブックの有益な特徴は、フェイスブックグループを作って指導者がその参加者を管理できること、そして、言語学習の助けとなり、さらなる文化の気づきを促すようなアクティビティの設定が可能なことである。本論では、2011年に行った日本とインドネシアの大学生同士の異文化間交流について、解説と評価を行う。学生たちは交流を通して自らの英語能力を高め、相手の文化について学ぶことができたことから、この交流は評価できると考える。

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According to Facebook's Newsroom Factsheet <newsroom.fb.com>, as of October 2012 there were more than 1 billion monthly active Facebook users, making it the world's most popular social networking service. The popularity of this website among young people as a vehicle for communication and self-expression has challenged educators and institutions to consider how it can be used for educational purposes. Since Facebook members can become friends and join groups with people in other countries, it provides a medium through which intercultural communication and language learning can take place, consistent with Thomas Friedman's (2005) view that technological advances have led to an increasingly *flat* world where information and opportunity can move more easily across borders.

The potential of the Internet to facilitate language learning and greater cultural awareness through communicative exchanges across borders has been much discussed and experimented with since the 1990s. Exchanges have been text-based—via email as keypals (Furmanovsky, 1999; Nozawa, 2002; Robb, 1996), online bulletin boards, and class blogs (Lee, 2009)—and done via audio or video conferencing and Skype (Ho, 2000; Merryfield, 2003; O'Dowd, 2007). Social networking sites such as Facebook are now showing great promise as they include the functionalities of these earlier technologies, for example communication through text and video messages, posting of photos, videos, and links to webpages, and discussions about such postings, but all in one website where students are already a member or can easily join. Many educators (Green,

2011; Kessler, 2011) are particularly enthusiastic about the ability in Facebook to create a closed group in which membership and content can be controlled by the group administrators, however little has been written about how to best organize such groups for intercultural exchanges. This paper describes and evaluates an intercultural Facebook exchange between university students in Japan and Indonesia that took place in 2011.

Background on Japan and Indonesia

According to the Socialbakers website <socialbakers.com>, Indonesia is the fourth largest Facebook market in the world, behind the Facebook founding country USA, Brazil, and India, while Japan is the 17th largest Facebook market (see Table 1). Facebook's relatively small market share in Japan may be due to its late entry to Japan, after popular Japan-based sites such as Mixi had established themselves with users. However, Facebook growth has been accelerating, and in the first 9 months of 2012 the number of Facebook users grew by 54% to finally overtake Mixi in terms of average monthly users.

Table 1. Top Facebook users by country (January, 2013)

Number	Country	Number of Users	Population Percentage
1	United States	167,431,700	53.9%
2	Brazil	65,301,560	32.5%
3	India	62,761,420	5.6%
4	Indonesia	50,583,320	20.8 %
17	Japan	16,879,340	13.3%

In regard to English education, instructors in Japan and Indonesia face similar challenges in that English classrooms are strongly influenced by entrance exams to high schools and universities that focus on testable discrete points such as vocabulary and grammar rules, rather than communication skills. In addition, unlike Asian countries such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, English is not commonly used in education, domestic trade, or administration, so the relevance of English to students' lives is often perceived as being limited. Students who go abroad often return changed as if a switch has

been turned on, with a new sense of what they share with people from other countries as well as how their culture is different. However, as travel and study abroad can be difficult to arrange for many, it is hoped that an online intercultural exchange may provide some of the same benefits.

Description of the exchange

Exchange participants

A total of 47 third year Japanese university English majors in the Kansai area aged 20-21 took part in the Facebook intercultural exchange. In Indonesia, 28 second year university Statistics majors living in Semarang aged 19-21 took part in the exchange. Nearly 65% of the Japanese students had travelled or lived abroad but none of the Indonesian students had. The English level of these two groups was comparable and estimated to be at the mid- to high-intermediate level.

Setting up the exchange

The exchange organizers met at an English teachers' conference in Indonesia in late 2010, and decided to do an exchange in the following school year. Due to experiences in previous exchanges, care was taken in planning so that the needs and expectations of both partner teachers and their students were clear. After planning the exchange via email and Skype, a Facebook Group was created called the Indonesia/Japan English and Culture Study Group, and the teachers made themselves administrators of the group (see Figure 1).

The Facebook Group page format has a central Wall area where all text messages, photos, videos, and links are posted. New posts or replies to previous posts enter at the top of the central Wall area, moving older posts and posts that do not get replies gradually down the Wall. Some of Facebook's features, in particular video uploading, can put excessive demands on a computer system or run up against security measures such as firewalls. It's important to try out Facebook with the computers to be used, if possible when school is in session and the system is in use, and not put too much emphasis on any one Facebook feature in case its use becomes problematic.

After setting up the Facebook Group, teachers made sure that all students had active Facebook accounts set in English, and then asked them to join the group. Almost all Indonesian students had Facebook accounts, but only one in four Japanese students had an account. It was important to

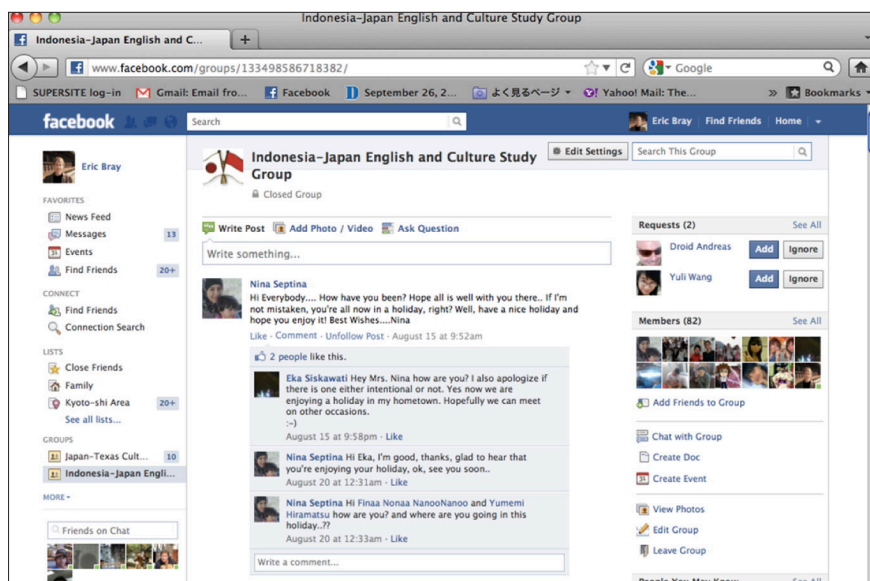


Figure 1. Indonesia-Japan English and culture study Facebook Group page

explain the privacy settings in Facebook, especially to new Japanese users used to Mixi where real names and photos are not used. For their profile photo, some students chose to use avatars such as cartoon characters, rather than their faces. Students were reminded that the group was a private group and that it was not necessary to *friend* anyone in the group. In addition, class discussions were held concerning appropriate topic choice and language use in posts.

Both classes were held in computer rooms, and Indonesian students did most of their work on Facebook in class, while for Japanese students, work in the Facebook group became primarily a homework activity once they were instructed in how to use Facebook. Initially it was important to show students clearly on a computer display or screen in the classroom how to do things on the group page, rather than merely explaining to students what they should do. Finally, before the exchange began, it was important for students to do some background study on the partner country, to become more aware of such things as its location, economy, religious traditions, etc.

Exchange activities

Introductions

The first step was for students to introduce themselves to the group. Introductions can be done with just a text message, but a short video is more interesting and helps students get a better sense of the personalities of the other students

in the exchange. A short self-introduction video can be recorded and uploaded with a digital camera, web camera, or cell phone. Introductions can be done individually, in pairs, small groups or as a whole class:

Whole class introduction. Japanese students lined up and came up to the camera one by one to introduce themselves, spending 10-15 seconds per person. For example, "Hi, my name's Jun. I'm from Osaka and my hobby is tennis. Nice to meet you". This also works well as a pair introduction. The teacher

later uploaded this to the Facebook Group page.

Small group introduction. Indonesian students did their introductions using a digital camera in small groups of three or four. One of the Indonesian students edited the video using Windows Movie Maker, adding background music and English subtitles. A simpler way to increase comprehensibility is to add a text version of the introduction below the video post in the comment area. Particularly with video recordings it is necessary to remind students to speak clearly and to check their video before and after uploading to make sure it is understandable. Students were encouraged to ask questions at the end of their introductions as a way to start conversations.

Discussion about social/cultural issues

The Japanese English course was an International Issues course designed to give students practice doing research on specific topics and then giving presentations on their findings. The Facebook intercultural exchange was made relevant to the Japanese class objectives by asking students to post questions for Indonesian students about their research topics, and then adding this information about Indonesia to their presentations.

Instead of merely posting questions such as,

“Do you have recycling programs in Indonesia? What kinds of things can you recycle?” students should be encouraged to provide some information about their own country in the post first, for example, “I’m doing some research on recycling. In Japan we have recycling of cans, PET bottles, paper and plastics. How about in Indonesia, what kinds of things can you recycle?” Including information about their own country provides context to help students answer the questions more easily and makes the post more interesting to read.

A major goal of the Indonesian class was to broaden students’ knowledge about topics discussed in class—popular music, folktales, street art, and fashion. The Indonesian students posted questions asking Japanese students about their topics in relation to Japan, and added this information to their written assignments. Reading posts exposed students to interesting information while providing exposure to new vocabulary. To help students improve their writing skills, students can be asked to check each other’s messages for grammar, vocabulary use, and clarity before posting them. If time permits, a final check by the instructor provides a good teaching opportunity.

Mystery cultural object/activity

An interesting activity that arose during the exchange was the *mystery cultural object/activity*. The purpose of this activity is to learn about the partner country as well as to stimulate thought and discussion about what is unique and interesting about one’s own culture:

Step 1. Students discuss the unique and interesting objects and activities found in their culture that people from another culture may not easily recognize.

Step 2. Students then take a photograph of the object or activity they have chosen (see Figure 2). For example, Japanese students chose things like a Japanese tea whisking brush (a), and a *takoyaki* pan (b). Indonesian students chose *batik* making tools, *canting* (c), and a bull race, *Karapan Sapi*, done every fall (d).

Step 3. Students then post the photo on the Facebook group page and ask students in the partner country to guess what the object is used for, or in the case of an activity, ask what people are doing and why. Students from the other culture write posts making guesses about the use or purpose of the object/activity.

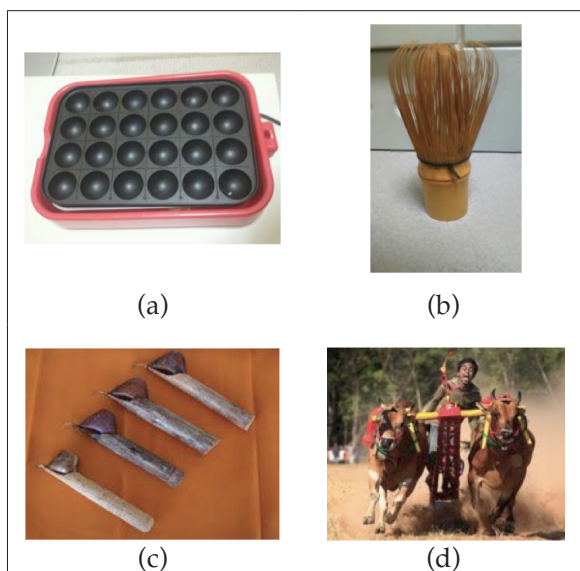


Figure 2. Student photographs of Mystery Cultural Objects/Activities.

A key point for this activity (which was learned the hard way!) is to tell students that if someone guesses correctly what the object is used for early in the activity, students should not immediately reveal that the answer is correct. Instead, they should let some time pass so that other students can also make guesses and discussion can take place about competing guesses/theories. Doing this leads to greater interaction and, hence, increased language use—thereby benefiting students. Also, when students cannot guess correctly what the object is used for, the student who posted the photo should give hints rather than merely reveal the correct answer.

Evaluation of the exchange

The instructors evaluated the exchange positively as there were many posts that showed evidence of thought, clarification, and humor. Students were able to learn from each other about the world and each other’s cultures, and, for example, exchanged information on *tempe*, a fermented soybean product popular in Indonesia, and the *Giant Pacific Garbage Patch* that Japanese students had studied about in a unit on the environment. Student postings tended to be short and conversational, often containing punctuation and emoticons common in text messaging. See the following example with names changed:

- Jun:** Hi all. our members are Yoriko, Rika, and Kenji. Can you guess what this (see Figure 3) is used for?
- Putra:** Is that tool for cleaning fish scales?? :D
- Dewi:** its mountain climbing tool! ehehehe, just kidding :D
- Andi:** hey guys! I think I know this picture. if not wrong, this is a ice cream seller tool. I saw this when I buy crushed ice. right?
- Jun:** Putra, Thank you for your comment. Good guess!!! but it's not....haha it might be able to be used for that. haha
- Hiroshi:** Nice try!! but it is not something like that.
- Jun:** Andi, thank you for your comment! it's not for ice cream seller. haha
- Jun:** Everyone: Thank you for your interesting comments! actually this is used for flower arrangement. We make an art with putting flowers onto this. I'll upload a picture which describes how to use this.
- Hiroshi:** I liked those comments of climbing tool and cleaning fish scale! It might be able to do that! hahaha I've never thought about them before!

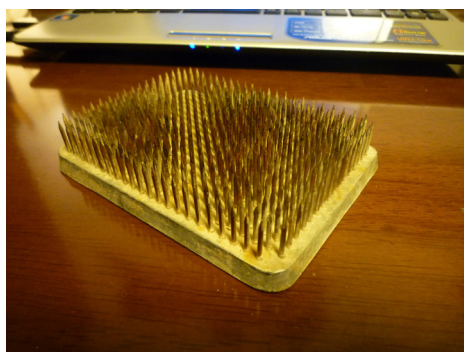


Figure 3. A Japanese *kenzan*

It was important for instructors to monitor postings to make sure that one student did not dominate the Wall, and to find posts to show students features they wanted to encourage. For example, one of the weaknesses of the Facebook design is that discussions are not threaded as they are on a bulletin board, so students needed to be reminded to make it clear in their replies who they were replying to. In addition, not all questions received replies, so instructors some-

times needed to encourage students to respond to questions.

Student opinions of the exchange were explored by distributing a post-exchange questionnaire developed in English. Two questions asked to what extent the exchange had been beneficial to students, and whether they wanted to continue the exchange (see Table 2). Adding the results for “a fair amount” and “a lot”, both Indonesian students (82.6%) and Japanese students (75.0%) were generally positive about the benefits provided by the exchange. When asked whether they wanted to continue the exchange in the next semester, about 60% of both Japanese and Indonesian students indicated they did.

When asked to explain their opinions about the exchange, the most common response was that students appreciated learning about another culture. One student wrote, “We didn’t know about Indonesia and the Facebook exchange helped us learn.” Another common response was that students felt their English had improved. For example, a student wrote, “Exchanging messages is good for developing English skills”. In addition, some students wrote they were happy they could make friends through the exchange and some continued exchanging messages outside of the exchange. The Indonesian students in particular wrote that using Facebook made class time more interesting.

Although a large majority of the comments about the exchange were positive, it should be noted that nearly 40% of both Japanese and Indonesian students were not sure they wanted to continue the exchange. Students in both countries cited difficulties connecting to Facebook or finding the time to do so. In addition, many students in both countries reported not having access to computers at home and instead relying on cell phones to connect to the Internet. Without a smartphone the Facebook website is difficult to view, and, even with a smartphone, students reported the inputting of text to be cumbersome and not conducive to writing longer posts.

Conclusion

The rapid growth of Facebook to become the world’s most popular social networking service has inspired many educators to consider its potential for educational purposes. Facebook builds on and consolidates the functionalities found in other media such as email, blogs, and so on into one site, and includes the ability to create a private group for members to interact

Table 2. Questionnaire results

Question: Was the exchange beneficial to you?							
Not at all		A little		A fair amount		A lot	
Indonesia	Japan	Indonesia	Japan	Indonesia	Japan	Indonesia	Japan
0.0%	2.3%	17.4%	22.7%	69.6%	52.3%	13.0%	22.7%

Question: Do you want to continue the exchange?					
No		Not Sure		Yes	
Indonesia	Japan	Indonesia	Japan	Indonesia	Japan
0.0%	4.6%	39.1%	32.6%	60.9%	62.7%

in. Organizing an intercultural exchange in a Facebook Group provides students with a safe and learner-centered forum where they can share ideas, photos, videos, links and then discuss them, facilitating greater intercultural awareness and language learning, while bringing education into the increasingly online lives our students lead.

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