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Fostering International Understanding: Lessons Learned Through a Virtual Exchange Program between Students in Japan and Nepal

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The term “international understanding” can be defined as learning about and developing positive attitudes towards other countries and peoples. The English language classroom is an ideal environment to introduce topics related to international understanding. As the whole world is increasingly interconnected, it is essential for people in any society to understand and accept similarities and differences without discriminating against cultures and traditions that are different to one’s own. With English as a *lingua franca*, the goals of English education should include developing students’ global perspectives, enhancing communication skills, and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Article 19 of the *Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy*, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO (1995, p. 11), states that “Learning foreign languages offers a means of gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures, which can serve as a basis for building better understanding between communities and between nations.”

As an island country, Japan offers limited opportunity for direct interactions with people from other countries and cultures. However, as the world is rapidly globalizing, it is becoming more and more important for children in Japan to learn about foreign languages and other cultures. In response to this

need, Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiated a new English curriculum at elementary schools beginning in the 2020 academic year. The reforms partly aim to broaden and deepen a sense of empathy with people from various backgrounds and cultures so that Japanese children can learn from an early age how to coexist and get along harmoniously with others.

Nepal is a landlocked country which has more than 60 spoken languages and more than 100 ethnic groups living peacefully. Here, people are mostly well adapted to other languages and cultures. However, as Nepal is economically less developed, international connections such as trade, foreign investments, and other international interactions are limited.

In this short article, we present the lessons learned through a virtual exchange program between students in Japan and Nepal conducted in February and March 2019. The aim was to enhance students’ understanding and interest in language, culture, and other aspects of both countries.

The Virtual Exchange Program

Program objectives: The objectives of this exchange program were:

1. to broaden students’ understanding of each other’s countries through live online videos
2. to explore students’ English language abilities and motivations in learning English.

These objectives were in line with the goals set forth by the Japanese government for English language education, which aim at “deepening students’ understanding of language and culture” (MEXT, 2017).

Program details: The creation and coordination of the program was originally initiated in December 2018. The two co-authors first met to discuss the possibility of organizing an exchange with students from two different countries, namely Japan and Nepal. Initially, Mutsumi approached the schools in Takasaki City with which she already had contact, and Pramila approached the schools in her native country, Nepal. The actual exchange was conducted between two junior high schools in Japan and two

high schools in Nepal in February and March 2019. However, this article focuses on one school in Japan and one school in Nepal with which the authors were particularly involved. The participating schools were Terao Junior High School in Takasaki, Gunma, Japan, and Shivapuri Secondary School, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Program method: Students in both countries researched their partner country before the exchange sessions began. First, students studied about their own country and culture and compared it with the partner country. The students then introduced their topics to their partners using a show and tell technique via Zoom video conferencing. The topics of the Japanese students' presentations included geography, population, food, culture, famous places, and sports in Japan. Finally, the students introduced Takasaki City, local food and festivals, and also spoke about their school (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Japanese students giving their presentation about traditional sports in Japan.



Figure 2. Students' poster.

After the Japanese students finished their presentations, students from Nepal introduced their topics using PowerPoint slides, pictures and real objects (realia). The topics included festivals, food, religion, history, geography, and popular sports in Nepal.

Once the students from both countries finished their sessions, they engaged in a question and answer session. To ensure a smooth exchange, teachers and the technical team from both countries held a test run beforehand. Similarly, surveys were conducted to assess students' understanding of their partner country before and after the exchange sessions.

Findings and Observations

Five simple questions were included in the survey before the exchange program while the post-exchange survey presented two questions. Figure 3.a shows students' responses to the question, "Have you ever heard about Nepal?" Out of 31 students, 28 students responded "yes," and three students responded "no". This is because the students had already carried out some research and made a poster about the country in their previous lessons. Although we do not clearly understand why three students answered "no," possible reasons might include their absence in the previous lessons or their lack of attention during the research and other classwork.

Another question asked about the location of Nepal (Figure 3.b), for which 14 students correctly chose "Asia," while five students each responded, "South America" and "Europe." Therefore, just under half of the students were aware of the geographical location of this country. However, there were still many students who chose other answers. Again, the reason for these incorrect choices may be the students' lack of attention during the lesson or during the completion of the survey. A similar survey was also conducted in Nepal, but due to resource limitations, we could not analyze the data to include the Nepalese students' responses in this paper.

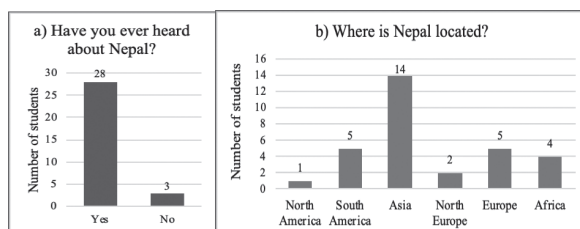


Figure 3. Japanese students' understanding of Nepal before the exchange program.

The next question on the pre-exchange survey was, "What famous things do you know about/from Nepal?" Most students answered curry, Mt. Everest, elephant, *momo* (Nepalese dumplings), and *chiya* (Nepalese tea).

Similarly, two questions were asked both in pre-exchange and post-exchange surveys. These questions were, "How familiar are you with Nepal?" (ネパールという国は、どれくらい身近に感じますか?) and "Do you want to visit Nepal?" (ネパールへ行ってみたいですか?). The results are shown in Figure 4.

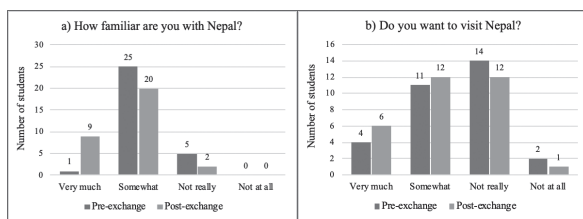


Figure 4. Japanese students' familiarity and interest in Nepal before and after the exchange program.

The results show that Japanese students' knowledge about Nepal increased after the exchange program. More students showed their interest in visiting Nepal in the post-exchange survey than in the pre-exchange survey. Although we are not able to report the survey responses from the Nepalese students, it is our hope that their knowledge about and interest in Japan also increased considerably.

Post Exchange Follow-Up

When we talked with some of the Japanese students after the exchange session, they provided very positive feedback about the exchange program. During the exchange, one Japanese student commented that Nepalese students are very good at English, even though English is a foreign language in Nepal, just as it is in Japan. The student said:

"I was surprised by how fluent everyone was in English. I was so nervous while asking questions to my Nepalese friends. We are in the same grade, but their English is much better than mine. I want to know more about how they study English at school and at home. I want to improve my English."

This response suggests that this kind of exchange program has a potential not only to enhance international understanding but also to motivate students to learn English.

In addition, a few members of the research team visited Nepal to meet the students in August 2019. Led by the school principal, all teachers, staff, and students of Shivapuri Secondary School showed their heartfelt appreciation for the opportunity that they had received. After interacting with the participating students in Nepal, we realized that many children knew a lot about modern Japanese culture, such as animation or cartoons. The number of Nepalese people living in Japan has been increasing, which means there may be a growing interest in Japan and Japanese culture in Nepal among adults. However, we did not assume that the same trend would be seen among children. As described in the earlier section, Japanese students had little

knowledge of Nepal before the exchange. Still, they were excited to learn that many Nepalese students were interested in Japan, and in return, they became more interested in Nepal. This phenomenon suggests that sharing interesting information when learning about other countries can be a good start point for children to deepen mutual understanding.

We observed another spillover effect. During our visit to the Nepalese school, one of the students said:

"I was so impressed with our Japanese friends' fine preparations and presentations. They were so disciplined and well prepared. On our side, some of our friends were having side talks during the session. But from the Japanese side, we didn't hear any such things."

We can infer from this, and from what one of the Japanese students said about Nepalese students' high English proficiency level, that the children learned positive aspects of their global partners and had an opportunity to reflect on their own weaknesses.

Conclusion

The program was successful in its goal of broadening cultural knowledge and international understanding. Students and teachers in both countries were satisfied with the results of the exchange program. Students were motivated by how their partners from the other side prepared and introduced their topics.

This sort of program has potential to develop a greater level of global awareness and an increased amount of understanding for the people, cultures, and societies of other countries. In our opinion, this is what any educational institution, especially those for young children, should implement in their classes. By doing so, younger generations in different countries will develop empathy for each other to maintain a peaceful world. From this point of view, this project was a great success for students in both countries.

We admit that there are some limitations to this kind of exchange program. First, among their many tasks, it is often said that Japanese junior/senior high school teachers are extremely busy every day preparing and conducting classes, preparing students for entrance examinations, and supervising club activities (Hosoya, 2001; Mason, 2019; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). Although many teachers are interested in conducting these types of intercultural activities, the continuation of programs can become challenging due to the extra work and

responsibilities involved. Second, it is difficult to provide all students with an opportunity to participate, as these programs cannot be conducted on a large scale throughout the school. Thus, selecting schools and classes may not be free of bias, as the researcher may use already established links with specific schools or teachers. Third, Internet connection, Wi-Fi, and in-class audio-visual equipment may not be readily available in all the participating schools, including Japan, which hinders the smooth progress of such virtual exchange programs. Finally, the time difference between the partnering countries is another factor to consider. Because Japan's local time is 3 hours and 15 minutes ahead of Nepal, we did not have much flexibility to schedule live exchanges. For this project, however, the Nepalese side kindly adjusted their class time to match the regular class schedule in Japan.

Despite their limitations, virtual exchange programs are highly beneficial and effective for promoting international understanding, particularly in the current and post COVID-19 contexts, where physical on-site exchange programs are challenging. Not limited to English language classes alone, education policymakers and practitioners can make effective use of such programs to achieve this objective. Looking ahead, we can see that the quality and outcome of international exchange programs at junior/senior high schools can be improved with careful negotiation, planning, and coordination with school officials, teachers, parents, and the students themselves.

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Mutsumi Iijima is a professor at Gunma University, University Education Center. With a master's degree in TESOL, her research interests include teaching English to students with learner differences, universal design systems, individualized instructions in TESOL, and implementing project-based learning in class.



Mutsumi's goal is to create learning environments where all learners can study actively with a high level of motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

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