

JHS Online-communication Experience: Enhancing Willingness to Communicate

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An online international exchange program was conducted at a public junior high school. Three Zoom sessions with Norwegian junior high school students and 11 English practice sessions were held. The goal was to investigate changes in students' perceptions of using English, with emphasis on their WTC (willingness to communicate) through this activity. In addition, factors contributing to these changes were elucidated by employing questionnaires, reflective writing, and interviews. Analyzing the resulting multiple datasets showed that the overall WTC level increased, though with individual variations. Qualitative analysis revealed task type, peer relationships, and support systems to be influencing factors.

公立中学校においてオンライン国際交流を課外活動として実施した。ノルウェーの中学生とZoom上で3回交流し、英会話練習を11回実施した。この活動を通して、生徒たちのコミュニケーションへの意欲 (WTC) にどのような変化があったのかを捉えることを目的とした。また変化の要因をアンケートと振り返り記述、インタビューを通して明らかにした。結果として、全体的にWTCに好影響が認められたが、個人差があることも明らかになった。特に、活動の種類、仲間との関係、支援の体制などの影響が明らかになった。

English education is undergoing major reform in Japan. MEXT renewed the curriculum guidelines entitled *The New Courses of Study* for junior high schools in 2021, aiming to foster communication skills from elementary through secondary schools.

In Japanese JHS education, the teaching autonomy of individual teachers is generally limited. For instance, textbooks approved by MEXT are chosen by the local board of

education, which also decides on the hiring of ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) and the selection of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) devices and applications. Moreover, mid-term and final exams must be used as the basis for assessments serving as the standard for high-stake senior high school entrance examinations. As pointed out by Nakatani (2010), there is a tendency toward grammar-centered instruction rather than communication, though the interaction using ICT is attracting attention (Thomas, 2017).

Although ICT use has been reported, there have been few studies on the practice of international exchange with students of the same age for junior high school students in conjunction with the development of communication abilities. Therefore, I will present an overview of WTC (willingness to communicate) and international exchange using ICT, and clarify the purpose of this study.

Literature Review

Willingness to Communicate

One of the individual difference factors that promote or hinder language acquisition is the concept of WTC, which McCroskey and Richmond (1987) defined as being primarily personality-based. This is the probability of a person engaging in free communication. They developed a 20-item questionnaire to measure WTC. However, MacIntyre et al. (1998) noted that the impact on L2 usage is more complex than that on L1. They explained that it is a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2. In addition, it was noted that L2 WTC is not stable, being referred to as situational L2 WTC. Several studies have demonstrated that multiple factors affect WTC. For instance, self-perceived communicative competence and communication affiliation are recognized as being highly impactful factors. Other major variables, such as self-esteem, frequency of using L2, motivation, and international posture, affect L2 WTC. (e.g., Cao, 2011; Gałajda, 2017; Toyoda, Yashima, & Aubrey,

2021). MacIntyre and Charos (1996), examining Canadian bilingual students, found that more chances to use L2 reduced levels of communication apprehension, consequently enhancing WTC. They also showed the path model to predict causal factors impacting WTC. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004), focusing on the ideal instructional model, found that higher exposure to content-based instruction (CBI) enhanced L2 WTC. The L2 pedagogical purpose does not consistently guarantee that learners will use the language in communicative situations (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Telecollaboration could well be an ideal action plan for providing such communicative situations in Japanese JHS contexts.

Telecollaboration

According to Ware and O'Dowd (2008), the use of network-based language teaching in foreign language education has expanded and entered its second phase in the 1990s. Thomas (2017) asserts that the umbrella term for CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) became routinely adopted in recent years. Wang (2007) proposed two sub-categories for educational use in CMC (Computer Mediated Communication). One is DLL (Distant Language Learning), in which students receive language instruction from instructors remotely. The other is telecollaboration, a collaborative activity whereby students learn a language through cultural exchange with their peers. According to Belz (2003), the goal of telecollaboration is to simultaneously foster not only linguistic functions, but also pragmatic development and awareness of the importance of international understanding.

Several practical studies have examined connecting students to foreign countries through telecollaboration. Mueller and Walzem (2020) found positive effects on both cultural understanding and language proficiency through online chats between Japanese and Taiwanese university students in an EFL environment. Through dynamic telecollaboration learning, participants can learn intercultural understanding and language education concurrently. This has been recognized as effective in various aspects, not only skill development but also affective factors of individual learners (e.g., Schenker, 2012). However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no prior research capturing the trajectories of perception of the affective factors in very novice students.

This study focused on telecollaboration with young Japanese learners being introduced with the aim of setting up communication situations fostering the use of English (Kobayashi et al., 2021). Students enjoyed interacting with foreign students by taking prepared quizzes. In projects for novice language learners, it seems to be common to design

lessons in which each skill is individually prepared, practiced and presented. However, extensive immediate interaction in English appears to be lacking. Exploring the perceptions of individual students in depth through such telecollaboration would thus be crucial.

Methodology

Purpose and Research Questions

This study, therefore, explores the possibility of implementing authentic communicative activities at public JHSs while reducing the load on teachers.

Two research questions need to be addressed:

- RQ1 How was the change in students' WTC perceived through telecollaboration in the international exchange with students of the same age?
- RQ2 What telecollaboration factors influenced students' WTC?

Study Site

The study was conducted at a medium-sized JHS (271 students, 9 classes) in the suburbs of Tokyo. The school consulted the author, serving as a coordinator. The author and a former JHS Japanese teacher organized the program. Eleven meetings were held for students' English conversation practice after school during the period from November 5th, 2020 through January 21st, 2021. Telecollaborations were conducted three times by zoom to a JHS in Norway. The Norwegian junior high school (NJH) was personally introduced by the author's international exchange activity project partner. Due to the time difference, NJH used the first period English class, while Japan used the after school extracurricular activity time, allowing only those students who wished to participate to take part.

Participants

Nine students submitted written consent forms allowing the use of their data and using pseudonyms in this report. The interlocutors were ten Grade-7 students from Norway. This study focuses on the five who submitted all three WTC questionnaires.

Focus Group Participants

Focus group participants are two Grade 8 girls, one Grade 8 boy, and two Grade 7 girls. Their initial feelings and expectations are summarized in Table 1 which reflected

concern, and even slight anxiousness. Aki mentioned a desire to improve her English skills and Natsu revealed her reason for joining to be encouragement from her parents.

Table 1
Participants

Name	Grade	Gender	English experience outside JHS	Expectations for the activity
Waka	8	Female	Eiken3	I'm worried about whether my English expressions will be understood by foreigners.
Haru	8	Female	Eiken3	A little anxious. I would like to talk to people in Finland, who I met during my childhood in the US.
Kei	8	Male	None	I'm not anxious at all. I want to talk with people who share my interests.
Aki	7	Female	Eiken3	I want to improve my pronunciation. Hopefully, my listening skills as well.
Natsu	7	Female	Eiken4	I joined because my parents encouraged me to do so. I fear that my mind will go blank in practice. I would prefer to talk in a small group.

Note: Eiken is an external English proficiency test, and level 3 is considered equivalent to CEFR A1 level.

Procedure

There were three Zoom interactions, each thirty minutes in duration. First, all of the instructors and students gathered with one monitor and participated in a 20-minute icebreaking introduction. After they had been divided into four breakout rooms, they were allowed to talk freely. Approximately equal numbers of Japanese and Norwegian students participated in each group. The ICT support staff from the city, the school's English teachers, the Grade 7 homeroom teacher, the principal and the vice principal observed the event.

The second interaction was mainly in the Zoom breakout rooms. Between the first and second Zoom interactions, the students shared with the whole group which kinds of questions they wanted to ask and those questions that they had been unable to answer in the first session. The students were then divided into groups to practice English conversation freely. On the Zoom interaction day, only one teacher and the ICT support staff were present. Students were not able to receive immediate linguistic support in this setting.

The third Zoom interaction started out with a 15-minute presentation as a whole group. JHS introduced Japanese culture in English, as requested by NJH. Due to technical difficulties caused by coronavirus related issues, the NJH presentation was not possible, and the students freely interacted in breakout rooms. Additionally, some students explained the school's buildings and scenery in English through videos on their tablet devices. Approximately 20 minutes of reflective discussion took place at the meeting following each Zoom session. Both instructors were present for all three sessions, which are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Zoom Sessions (ZS) and Reflections

ZS	Date conducted	Content	Details
ZS (1)	November 25	Introduction	20-min. introduction as a whole group. 20 min. of free interaction divided into 4 BORs. 6 teachers with 2 instructors supported.
ZS (2)	December 17	Free interaction	30 min. of free interaction divided into 4 BORs. Only 2 teachers were available with 2 instructors.
ZS (3)	January 18	Presentation	15-min. presentation about Japan in BORs. 15 min. of free interaction.

Note: BOR: breakout room (in a Zoom function)

Data Collection

Three datasets were collected: (a) WTC questionnaire, (b) reflections, and (c) interview. A summary is presented in Table 3. All of the above data were in Japanese, and the author

is solely responsible for the English translations herein.

Table 3

Data Collection Method

Instruments Used	WTC Questionnaire	Reflection Sheet	Focus Interview
Date Conducted	November 25	November 25	December 22
	WTCQ (1) Before the OLI	Reflections of ZS and expectations for ZS (2).	After reflective discussion, 2 students' interviews.
	December 17	December 17	
	WTCQ (2) After the OLI	Reflections of ZS (2). Impressions on NJH students.	
	January 18	January 18	
	WTCQ (3) After the OLI	Reflections of ZS (3) and overall program. Changes in perception after versus before the program. Impact on English proficiency.	

Note: OLI: Online Interaction. WTCQ: WTC questionnaire.

The first WTCQ was distributed before the first Zoom session on November 25th. After the interaction, an open-ended reflection sheet was distributed as homework. The students were asked to give their impressions of the Zoom session and their expectations for the next one.

On December 17th and January 18th, WTCQs were distributed immediately after the Zoom sessions along with the open-ended reflections. For the second reflection, an open-ended question about impressions of the NJH was added. For the last reflection, the students were asked 3 additional open-ended questions regarding their overall impression of the program, changes in perception before and after the program, and impact on English proficiency.

Interview data was collected after the reflective discussion on December 22nd to clarify an unclear statement made by the student herself and one student who participated voluntarily.

WTC Questionnaire

The WTCQ was adjusted by the author, based on McCrosky and Richmond (1990), as directly cited from Watanabe (2017) whose participants were university students. Although the questionnaire was written in Japanese, it was adjusted for the JHS, e.g., “Discussion” was changed to “Group talk.” Eight questions were employed on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 6 for “always speaks” to 1 for “never speaks”.

Data Analysis

WTC questionnaire responses were statistically analyzed. Retrospective notes such as open-ended reflection sheets were coded by two instructors as soon as they were submitted. After jointly extracting key words and making sure there were no discrepancies, the common items were written on the board and shared with the students. As students provided further explanations, the author immediately wrote them on the board, followed by categorizing them collaboratively. The statements recorded on the blackboard were written in Excel and content analysis was conducted by the author. The interview data was recorded as notes and the content was reviewed with the students themselves. The interview lasted about ten minutes.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Presentation of the descriptive WTC statistics for five students showed that, overall, there was gradual improvement during the course.

Table 4
Summary of WTC Scores for All Participants

Date	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Nov. 25	4.7	.92	.82
Dec. 17	4.77	1.03	.91
Jan. 18	4.95	.87	.93

Figure 1
Mean of WTC Scores for All Participants



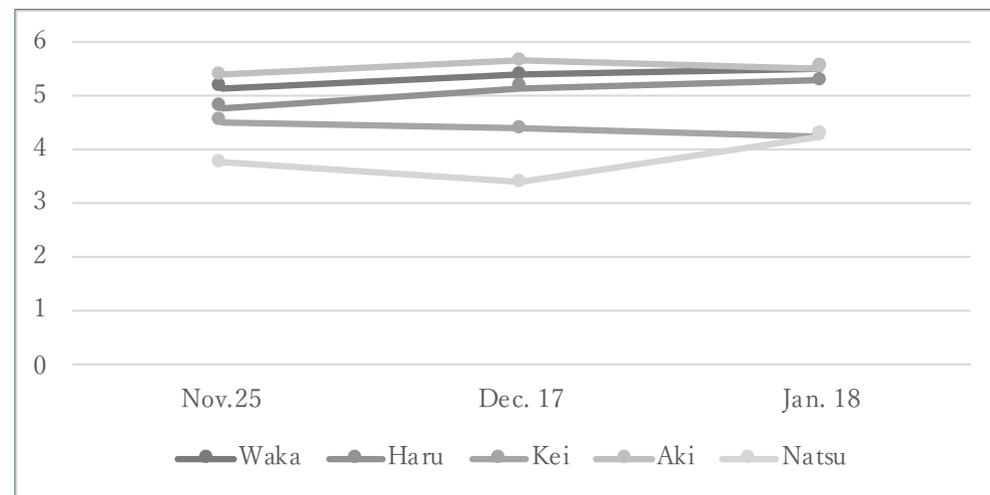
Individual Trajectories

The average WTC for each of the 5 participants is shown in Table 5 and Figure 2. The results showed that WTC scores for some participants did not necessarily improve linearly.

Table 5
Individual Results

Date	Waka	Haru	Kei	Aki	Natsu
Nov. 25	5.12	4.75	4.5	5.37	3.75
Dec. 17	5.37	5.12	4.37	5.62	3.37
Jan. 18	5.5	5.25	4.25	5.5	4.25

Figure 2
Individual Trajectories



Individual Trajectories of Three Students

Trajectories with reflection comments were extracted and are summarized in Table 6 below. Aki had the highest WTC score all three times. Haru was in the middle. Natsu was consistently the lowest. These three participants were extracted for comparison of the qualitative data.

Table 6
Individual Trajectories of the Three Participants

Date	Aki	Haru	Natsu
Nov. 25	5.37 Enjoyed speaking without worrying about grammar. Excited to be participating in authentic communication. Motivated to improve English skill & intercultural understanding	4.75 Worried about interactions. Relieved by friendly support from Norwegian students.	3.75 Not confident in English. Joined the program based on parental advice.
Dec. 17	5.62 Found listening, which she was confident in, difficult.	5.12 Satisfaction with successful experience. Supported each other. Recognition of lack of knowledge about Norway.	3.37 Need to be prepared and comfortable with impromptu responses.
Jan. 18	5.5 Enjoyed being able to communicate. Critically perceived Japanese education.	5.25 Satisfaction with making friends in English. Confidence in speaking English. Motivated to study abroad.	4.25 The presentation was fun. Awakening to the image of language use and motivated to learn.

As noted above, the task conditions differed among the sessions. At the first Zoom session, adequate support was provided for each breakout room. Aki enjoyed speaking without worrying about grammar.

In the second Zoom session, some activities were handled independently. The author observed that some groups remained silent, while others were laughing and appeared to be truly enjoying themselves. Many keywords related to emotions such as disappointment and satisfaction were written in the reflection sheets. Haru's group members, both Japanese and Norwegian students, got along well. They tried to support each other in communicating even when they experienced a communication breakdown. This suggests that relationships with peers may have an impact on WTC. Natsu's comments reflected regret over her lack of preparation for the interactions. Support system must be taken into consideration.

In the last Zoom session, Natsu was very happy and relieved as she had prepared a presentation, whereas Aki experienced a slight decline in her WTC score from the second to the third session, when she had to participate in a group presentation. She enjoyed speaking freely more than the presentation. This raises the possibility that task type may have influenced her WTC score.

Table 7
Summary of Content Analysis of Reflections

Coding Examples	Theme
Enjoyed authentic communication. Preferred free interaction. Satisfied with presentation.	Task type
Worried. Friendly support. Successful speaking experience. Motivation to learn about NJH.	The relationships with peers
Anxious. Need to be prepared. Afraid to improvise an answer.	Support system

Interview Results

On December 22nd, the author asked Aki to explain her comment in detail. The question arose from what she reflected as enjoyment of "speaking *normally*." The author assumed that the students have English subject classes with ALTs, and would be studying "normal English." SS, participants who did not submit all of the required documentation but participated in the whole program, were also present. The interview results were as follows:

- Teacher (T):** You communicate freely with ALTs in English, right? Or, is it not like that?
- Aki (A):** No! Not at all. I have to speak correctly with the ALTs.
- Other student (SS):** No way. No, No. We don't use gestures or express our feelings to the teachers.
- A:** It's like the ALTs are giving me assignments and they listen to me and evaluate. So, I feel like reading aloud in my head, not speaking or expressing.
- SS:** That's right. It's so different. It's always a memorization task. I can't talk freely.
- A:** It's an English lesson, but it's like a drill using formal speech (keigo).

SS further explained that this was the difference between “normal talk” and “English as a school subject.” The potential positive impact of introducing daily conversation through peer interaction in English classes at JHS was observed. In other words, the students may have fundamentally lacked the awareness of learning English for use in the real world through English as a school subject.

Discussion

Communicating with students of the same age was perceived differently from the classroom English experience. In order to enhance students' WTC in English, opportunities for various language activities should be utilized by the school, not only in the classroom.

The themes of the students' retrospective reflective comments were mainly about emotions, such as anxiety and enjoyment, as well as skills improvement. WTC scores did not rise linearly and multiple factors such as task type, peer relationships, and support system were found to have an effect. These findings point strongly to environmental factors within the three influencing factors assertion by Garajda (2017). Furthermore, it appears to be subordinate items specifically for practitioners to consider.

The overall WTC score was higher at completion than before starting the program. This improvement, as a response to RQ1, suggested that interaction with students of the same age exerts a positive impact on WTC. Reflective statements highlighted the differences between telecollaboration and classroom learning. Moreover, some students seemed to build harmonious relationships among peers, both NJH and JHS, in different

grades. The following is an excerpt from Haru's reflection sheet on January 18th.

Through this program, I was able to learn a lot about Norway, a country that I hadn't known anything about beforehand, and I was able to hear about a completely different school system. I was able to make friends from other grades in our school.

In response to RQ2, three factors have been identified, revealing differences in each student's individual preferences. Aki preferred more free-interaction while Natsu enjoyed well prepared interaction. However, taking advantage of the small-group environment, we may have provided adequate support which cannot be done in the whole-class setting.

Summary and Conclusion

This study was conducted in a Japanese Junior High School using three Zoom sessions with a Norwegian Junior High. A questionnaire, retrospective writing, and interviews were employed. Based on the results, overall willingness to communicate was increased with different individual trajectories. Content analysis showed that the factors of task type, relationship with peers, and support system can be both positive and inhibiting factors for willingness to communicate. As MacIntyre et al. (1998) pointed out, it is clear that complex factors influence the willingness to use L2. This study also found that the opportunity to use L2 and the successful experience increased the students' willingness to communicate as well as their motivation to learn English.

This study was conducted on a very small scale. The author does not intend to generalize the results to all student populations. Moreover, the students were self-selected; the results might not be applicable to less motivated students. Finally, it merits emphasis that it is important to provide more authentic interaction with appropriate support.

Bio Data

Yuki Otsuki received her MA in English Education from the Global Japanese Study Department at Meiji University in Japan. She has continued studying in the doctoral program focusing on elementary school English education, communication strategies and interactions. Currently, she puts her skills to use on a part-time basis in elementary and middle schools. She is also an instructor for in-service teacher training and a part-time lecturer for undergraduate students in elementary education courses.

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