

An online exchange between university-level language learners in Japan and Australia

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1. Introduction

1.1 Language education in Japan and Australia

For the past few decades, English has been an integral part of the national curriculum in Japan for students in junior and senior high school. In 2019, curriculum reforms saw the expansion of elementary school English education so that now all students in the third and fourth grades are exposed to English through language activities, and in the fifth and sixth grades it is now a formal and assessed subject area (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2018).

In Australia, despite now having a national curriculum, the implementation of education programs is the mandate of the various states and territories (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014). Since the development of the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987), language education has played some role, to varying degrees, in the education of students in Australia, although any compulsory period generally ends around the eighth year of schooling, but only around 12% of students, and in some states as low as 5%, continue language study to the end of high school (Poyatos Matas & Mason, 2015).

English is the de facto official language in Australia, and there are a range of languages other than English that are taught in schools across the country. Currently, ACARA (n.d.) has curriculum guidelines developed for 16 languages and language groups. The decision about what language/s are taught in a particular school is largely determined by regional boards of education, although schools may also have some autonomy over this decision. At a national level, the rationale for learning a particular language is often based on an economic rationale, although at a grass-roots level it may be more impacted by local community needs (Mason & Hajek, 2020). Japanese is currently the most popular language studied across the country, a result of both strong government funding in the early 1980s, and ongoing relationships due to travel and trade. Japan has become a sought after destination for many Australians who visit to experience a different culture and to ski and travel. After Japanese the most popular languages are French, German, Mandarin, and Italian (Midgley, 2017).

1.2 Interpersonal (online) language exchange

Interpersonal exchange with speakers of the target language (TL) is an ideal way for language learners to hone their language and intercultural communication skills. Study abroad programs are now a common feature of many higher education programs. While long-term study abroad programs are often seen as ‘life-transforming’ experiences, even short-term in-country programs can benefit learners (Kang & Pacheco, 2020). Study abroad, however, is not accessible to all students (at any time let alone during a global pandemic), nor is it a guarantee of exposure to ‘limitless opportunities to interact with the target language and its speakers’, for example if students remain closely connected to native language peers (Kang & Pacheco, 2020, p. 426).

The introduction of communication technologies into language classes has brought increased opportunities to connect learners to their TL peers. With technological advancements and a drive toward online learning (in Japan pushed forward by the Covid-19 pandemic), synchronous online exchange can offer a ‘a kind of learning which is not found in traditional textbooks’ (Avgousti, 2018, p. 820). The resulting new pedagogies may be referred to as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which “fosters meaningful exchanges between academics and students with peers in geographically distant locations and from different linguacultural backgrounds” (Naicker et al., 2021, p. 1). In Avgousti’s (2018) review of such exchanges, many conducted at a university level, a common result was improved cultural sensitivity, and an increased interest in students’ own cultures. In a study of an online exchange between Australian students studying Mandarin, and Chinese students studying English, there was consensus that linguistic and intercultural competence had improved (Tian & Wang, 2021).

Within this context, the authors sought to introduce a COIL component into their respective introductory language classes. Following, we detail the context and structure of the pilot program, before reflecting on the challenges and successes we encountered, drawing on our own observations and survey responses from participating students.

2. Pilot language exchange program

2.1 The university, course, and class contexts

Nagasaki University (NU) is a national university in Nagasaki City, on the island of Kyushu in Japan. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses across a range of disciplines, with around 9000 students enrolled in 2021, including 850 students in the undergraduate Faculty of Education. The university caters to students from the local region including those that come to the mainland from nearby island communities, although more than half come from outside of the prefecture.

English Conversation I is a 15-week course for second-year undergraduate students

in the Faculty of education, and is a required course for students who major or minor in English education. For the most part, students taking this course are aiming toward a career as a secondary school English teacher, or as an elementary school teacher, with English being a core part of the curriculum for students in grades 3-6. With the exception of COVID-19 restrictions, the course is usually delivered face-to-face. It is one of several English-medium courses available to students, meaning that all instruction, engagement, and assessment is conducted in English. The aim of the course is to develop oral communication skills, with a particular focus on communication skills and content knowledge relevant to educational issues and teaching practice.

In the Spring semester of 2021, 20 sophomores enrolled in the course, with a fairly even mix of male and female students. All students were in their late teens, having entered university soon out of high school, and all students were born and raised in Japan, with the exception of one exchange student from mainland China. As the students had elected English as a major or a minor, the level of motivation for learning English was generally high, although students' willingness to communicate in English varied, and most students reported having little to no experience speaking in English with people other than teachers and Japanese classmates. As students follow a fairly structured program taking the same courses as their peers with the same specialisation, they had established close relationships with each other during their first year of university, and the class dynamic was quite positive and open (as opposed to some English classes where students may be quite reserved about speaking in front of others).

The University of New England (UNE) is a public university located in a rural setting in northern New South Wales. It originated as a satellite campus of Sydney University but was granted independent status in 1954 as the first university located outside of the state and national capital cities. Research and teaching includes areas such as arts and humanities, education, health and nursing, business and law, environmental and rural science, and science and technology. There are over 22,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at UNE and they are located around the Australian continent, as well as overseas, and in Japan. One of the unique aspects of this university is a dedicated distance education program which has been active well before the internet offered new methods for online learning. As a result, many programs at UNE run predominantly online, including the Japanese programs. This is a drawback for those in full time or part time employment and for other students who are at a busy time of life parenting.

Japanese 101A is a unit offered for beginners who have, in theory, never studied Japanese before. This unit, which runs for eleven weeks, aims to establish basic competence in Japanese through aural and oral skills, reading and writing, and intercultural communication. Further, students are encouraged from the beginning to de-

velop their basic digital skills in typing in Japanese, using Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji.

In 2021, the cohort of around 166 students included around 70% women, and one in five were over 30 years of age, including those seeking to change careers, some who have travelled to Japan and even some retirees. In terms of geographical location, the majority were found in state capital cities, although a secondary group were in regional centres and minorities were found in isolated locations in Australia and in overseas situations. We also had some students in New Zealand, China, Europe, and Japan. The group had mixed ability as some students were already experienced in learning multiple languages, and others had had varied levels of exposure to Japanese, while others were complete beginners, who had never learnt a language previously.

2.2 Program structure

The initial pilot program ran during April and May of 2021, with three separate 60-minute COIL sessions held via Zoom. Fortunately, the schedule for JAPN101A was relatively flexible, and was able to be adjusted to the fixed time of English Conversation I, which meets at 9 am each Tuesday during the Spring semester (10am for UNE students). Each session involved introductory and concluding sessions with all students and teachers in the main room, with breakout sessions focused in turn on English and Japanese communication practice (Table 1).

As much as possible, breakout groups were composed of four students, with two students from each university, and groups were retained for the program as much as possible to allow rapport to develop (with some necessary changes made to cater for absences, etc.). While students were engaging in their conversation activities, teachers moved from room to room in order to observe and support students as necessary, using the appropriate language for the session. Photo 1 and Photo 2 show screenshots of a whole group session and a breakout room session, shared with permission from participants.

Table 1. Overview of the program

<i>Week One</i>		
W/G	5 mins	Teachers introduce the classes and the program.
B/O	10 mins	Students introduce each other and ask questions in their TL.
B/O	20 mins	UNE students ask pre-prepared questions to stimulate Japanese conversation.
B/O	20 mins	NU students ask pre-prepared questions to stimulate English conversation.
W/G	5 mins	Reflections from teachers.

<i>Week Two</i>		
W/G	5 mins	Feedback and advice from teachers based on first session observations.
B/O	10 mins	UNE students share pre-prepared photos of their home/town to stimulate a Japanese conversation, with a focus on creating questions in the TL.
B/O	10 mins	NU students share pre-prepared photos of their home/town to stimulate an English conversation, with a focus on creating questions in the TL.
B/O	10 mins	UNE students pose the question 週末、何をしましたか。 to stimulate a Japanese conversation, with a focus on listening comprehension.
	10 mins	NU students pose the question 'What did you do on the weekend?' to stimulate an English conversation, with a focus on listening comprehension.
W/G	5 mins	Reflections from teachers.
<i>Week Three</i>		
W/G	2 mins	Very brief introduction to the session format.
B/O	12 mins	UNE students share pre-prepared photos of a local/tourist spot to stimulate a Japanese conversation, with a focus on sustaining a conversation.
	12 mins	NU students share pre-prepared photos of their local/tourist spot to stimulate an English conversation, with a focus on sustaining a conversation.
B/O	30 mins	UNE students recite their end-of-semester oral presentations. NU students listen, and provide feedback, help with pronunciation, respond to questions, etc. A mix of TLs is required with a shared goal of mutual understanding.
W/G	4 mins	Reflections from teachers and two volunteer students.

W/G refers to a whole group session, B/O refers to a break-out room session.



Photo 1. Screenshot of a whole group session



Photo 2. Screenshot of a breakout room session, with student describing a selected photograph

3. Reflections on the program

3.1 From the perspective of NU students' experiences

When the program was first introduced to the students, they showed real excitement, but also expressed anxiety about their communicative ability, as one student responded in the pre-program survey, "I feel very nervous. Can I make myself [understood] in English? Or can I understand what they tell? I will do my best". While the majority of NU students stated they enjoy speaking English (83%), they also "like to plan and practice before speaking English" (61%). The nature of the COIL session was an opportunity to expose students to spontaneous and free communication, a specific area in need of practice, while also providing some support.

At the end of the three sessions, NU students were asked the same series of questions and, on average, their reported enjoyment of speaking English increased, comfort in speaking English increased, and worries about making mistakes decreased. One student noted that, "The experience is important for my life. This is because I have never gone to foreign country. So I had a good time in the class!!" The open reflections revealed an increased motivation for many students. For example, "I was surprised that Australian students were so good at Japanese. So I want to study English more". During the final session, many groups shared social media profile details between the members, to ensure sustained communication.

3.2 From the perspective of UNE students' experiences

The UNE students had only studied Japanese for about 6 weeks at the beginning of this cross-border opportunity. As a result, the experience of meeting with the NU students was formational for their language practice. Students from UNE were pleased that in listening although they had not understood everything, they were able to pick up on keywords. This is an important step for beginning learners who

start by focusing on communication and repair strategies. Working with others in their group and even using sign languages were strategies which were successful for students. It is also notable that while both groups experienced anxiety about the initial opportunity, the UNE students noticed how their anxiety reduced following the opportunities. Among the student comments, one suggested that the silences sometimes felt awkward, but this too, led them to work on how to improve their language. One student from UNE commented about their anxiety as follows after the first meeting with NU:

“I thoroughly enjoyed the session this morning! I have been very anxious about class work in general, and particularly these sessions; but [I was] determined to see it through. Participating today has made an enormous difference to my level of anxiety. It seemed to me that most students were anxious at the beginning but were comfortable and relaxed by the end. I am sure that having participated will have a positive impact across all aspects of my study [of Japanese].”

At the end of the Australian Trimester, there were many comments in the student general feedback about the Japanese course about how significant the NU-UNE exchange was to the UNE students. One student concluded: “The Nagasaki Exchange was brilliant”.

3.3 From the perspective of program facilitation

The length of the program was limited only because of the logistical realities of working across two different academic calendars. NU's academic calendar has two se-

Table 2. Comparison of teaching schedules

Nagasaki University		University of New England
<i>Autumn semester</i>	January	
	February	
	March	<i>Trimester 1</i> (<i>JAPN101A</i>)
<i>Spring semester</i> (<i>English Conversation I</i>)	April	
	May	
	June	
	July	<i>Trimester 2</i> (<i>JAPN102B</i>)
August		
	September	
<i>Autumn semester</i> (<i>English Conversation II</i>)	October	
	November	
	December	

mesters, and while UNE works on three trimesters per year, Japanese courses run for just two of those periods. As shown in Table 2, the two courses overlap for only three months of the year. The April/May time period was ideal as it allowed the beginner UNE students to progress through their course and end with the COIL sessions (although a break was necessary part-way through due to the Golden Week holiday). The only other overlapping period in July is not ideal as it coincides with the examination period for NU students. This creates a serious challenge to developing a sustained program.

The Zoom platform worked well for the sessions and students were familiar with the key functions, so technically there were few problems. We had initially underestimated the time it would take to move between sessions. At first, we had called students back to the main room between each breakout room session, in order to have a clear distinction between the activities and to facilitate a 'switch' in students' minds as they moved from one language to another. By the second session we had limited this and only sent students a message when it was time to change their language focus. This most likely resulted in a less distinct 'switch' between languages, but we felt that time communicating together, in whichever language was spoken, was a more effective use of time. As we moved between the breakout rooms, we noticed a lot of necessary code-switching, and in some cases a strong lean toward one language or another, often due to a group member (either from UNE or NU) with a strong personality and/or stronger language ability or confidence. While during this pilot program our grouping considered the balance of UNE and NU students, it would be worthwhile in the future to also consider the ability and confidence level of students in group composition. It may also be necessary to think more about the advantages and disadvantages of keeping groups intact, and with creating new groups each session or each week.

4. Final thoughts

Overall the program was a great success in that it provided language students with an opportunity to use the language and communication skills that they had developed during their studies, and apply them to meaningful conversations with target language speakers. It proved to be an opportunity that was enjoyable, helped to increase motivation, served to break down some language anxiety, and hopefully initiated some ongoing connections. As a pilot program, we found some areas where we could improve the flow of the activities and maximise communication within groups.

With sustained connections and relationship development, there may be further affective and proficiency gains to be harnessed, and we are looking for ways to develop the exchange program between UNE and NU students for the future.

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