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A Case Study of Collaborative Online International Learning Between Finnish and Japanese University Students: Learning and Using English Beyond the Classroom

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This paper aims to examine how a pair of Japanese and Finnish university students collaborate through an original Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project which was introduced as a completely out-of-class activity. Using a case study approach, I focus on the Japanese student's reflection for an in-depth understanding of her experience of the COIL project over 4 months. The analysis is based on the data collected through an interview and her actual interchange of email messages and letters with her Finnish partner student. The results show (a) that the Japanese student embarked on the project with both expectations of intercultural communication and anxieties about her English proficiency, and (b) that the two students co-constructed their own communication styles as they shared personal information and developed empathy and rapport with each other. I also found (c) that the Japanese student's obsession with formality and accuracy as well as recognition of her lack of communicative English contributed to the gradual decrease in the number of email messages. However, (d) this helped her to realize her needs and maintain, even enhance, her motivation to study English. The study also sheds light on the necessity of providing well-balanced opportunities for students to learn and use both formal and informal English in order to encourage better communication.

本稿は、授業外活動として独自に導入した「国際協働オンライン学習プロジェクト」に於ける日本とフィンランドの大学生ペアの協働の過程を探究する。ケーススタディの手法を用いて、同プロジェクトに4ヵ月間参加した日本の学生のインタビューと実際のやりとり（eメールと手紙）を分析した結果、(a)日本の学生は異文化交流への期待とともに、自身の英語力に対する不安も抱きながらプロジェクトに参加し、(b)日本とフィンランドの学生はお互いに個人情報を共有し、心を通わせ信頼関係を築きながら自分たちのコミュニケーションの形式を協働的に創り上げた。また、(c)日本の学生の形式と正確さへの執着および英語力の不安により、eメールや手紙の送信回数が徐々に減る傾向が見られたが、(d)同時にそれにより自身のニーズを認識し、英語学習のモチベーションの維持ひいては向上に結びついたと認識していることが明らかになった。さらに本研究の結果、より良いコミュニケーションを促すために、フォーマルに加えてカジュアルな英語表現の学習および使用の機会の必要性も示された。

Keywords

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), out-of-class learning, Japanese and Finnish university students, learner autonomy, case study
国際協働オンライン学習、授業外学習、日本とフィンランドの大学生、学習者の自律、ケーススタディ

The importance of collaboration has been emphasized in the field of education, and various types of collaborative learning have been widely introduced in the classroom at different institutional levels (e.g., Ashwell et al., 2014; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2013). Regardless of disciplinary subject area, a majority of the collaborative activities are carried out locally, mainly within the same class (e.g., Shibley & Zimmaro, 2002) and between or among several classes (e.g., Hayashi & Banno, 2019), while others are designed to integrate global perspectives enabling students to interact with peers in different countries (Takeda et al., 2022). Although tandem learning has been widely used in language teaching and learning for a long time (e.g., Menard-Warwick et al., 2013; Wakisaka, 2018), *Collaborative Online International Learning* (COIL) is a new pedagogical approach that connects students in different countries and provides opportunities for them to interact with peers. COIL

is generally embedded in the formal curriculum and has been introduced mainly at the university level (Ikeda, 2020). In Japan, an increasing number of universities (e.g., Kansai University, Nanzan University, and Sophia University) have introduced the COIL approach, and those universities have embarked on this global-oriented project. Many information and communication technology (ICT) tools such as Skype, Flipgrid, and email can be used for different purposes within COIL projects, but the primary purpose of COIL is to enhance intercultural competencies and digital skills while students are engaged in project-based learning. In many cases, COIL has been integrated as part of course activities in the formal learning environment, but it is seldom introduced beyond the classroom. In this research study, I focus on the introduction of COIL project in out-of-class settings. Using a case study approach, I examine how a Japanese university student and her Finnish partner collaborated over 4 months. I also analyze the Japanese student's reflection on her experience of the COIL project.

Defining Collaborative Online International Learning

COIL employs various types of ICT tools and enables learners to engage in collaborative learning across countries. It was first introduced at the State University of New York in 2004. In Japan, Kansai University was the first to participate in the COIL global network in 2014 and has since been appointed as the leader of COIL projects in Japan, where a total of 13 universities have been selected to introduce COIL to classes at their own institutions.

A number of research studies on COIL have been conducted in recent years. Kodama (2018) reports on her work with a COIL project at San Jose State University, California, where she incorporated a COIL approach into her Japanese course to provide opportunities for students to collaborate internationally with Japanese students in Kagoshima University to learn about Japanese culture. What was unique about this project is that it included synchronous sessions and was carefully designed so that students could develop their critical thinking skills as well. At the end of the project, the reflections of the students from San Jose State University were overall positive, and some students maintained close relationships with Japanese students even after the course ended.

Kato et al. (2020) conducted a project-based foreign language learning project between Shizuoka University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. They had students communicate via Skype and collaboratively create their own homepages. Likewise, Sawasaki and Yokono (2020) introduced a similar project for their Japanese and American university students to give presentations in English (Japanese students) and in Japanese (U.S. students) based on the information they exchanged about their universities and university life. These two studies used both the students' output performance and questionnaires to analyze and compare student cognitive and affective variables before and after the project. The results showed that the students improved their speaking and writing skills (cognitive aspects), and their intrinsic motivation (affective component) was also enhanced.

Although various benefits of COIL have been identified in previous research, many of these studies have been conducted only in formal learning environments, and few studies have focused on out-of-class settings. Moreover, previous accounts have tended not to examine in detail the processes of interaction for pairs and groups of students. To fill this gap, the current research study was carried out within an original COIL project that was completely based on out-of-class activity. In this study, I examine closely the processes of

interaction between a pair of Japanese and Finnish university students who took part in the project.

Narrative Inquiry

This study looks in detail at the narrative of a Japanese university student (Yuki) together with her actual exchanges of email messages, a physical card, and a letter with her Finnish partner (Judy) to explore the following issues (both names are pseudonyms):

1. How did Yuki reflect on the feelings she had before joining the project?
2. How did Yuki and Judy collaborate on their mutual out-of-class learning?
3. What problems and challenges did Yuki face during the project?
4. What kind of change did the project bring about for Yuki, if any?

Methods

A Finnish and Japanese COIL Project

An original COIL project was designed by a Finnish colleague at the University of Helsinki and myself and introduced as a completely out-of-class activity in October 2019. The project's primary purpose was to provide both Finnish and Japanese students opportunities to interact with each other through whatever communication tools they chose. My colleague and I could easily imagine that students have different interests and expectations about these kinds of projects, so the purpose of the interaction was not specified at the beginning. Each instructor told the students about the COIL project, and those who wanted to participate in the project signed up for it. Students were encouraged to choose whatever activity they thought was best, such as book discussions, English chat time, or a pen-pal program. Participation in the project was voluntary, and 20 students (10 Finnish and 10 Japanese) showed interest. The students were paired based on their English proficiency levels and their preferred means of communication and activities. They were later informed of their partners' names and email addresses. Throughout the process, the instructors did not intervene in any of the communication between the student pairs, in order to understand whether and how students collaborate on their mutual out-of-class learning without scaffolding from instructors.

Participants

Purposive sampling was selected to examine the Finnish and Japanese COIL project. Out of the 10 pairs, the pair of Yuki and Judy, her Finnish partner, was selected because they successfully exchanged messages and engaged in the project over 4 months. Yuki was a third-year Japanese student majoring in economics. When she was a second-year student, she had enrolled in a special English program that the university offers exclusively for students who have high English proficiency levels as well as a strong desire to develop their English language skills and intercultural understanding. As a representative of the university, Yuki was also sent to Malaysia and stayed there for 1 week to participate in an internship program in summer 2019. Similarly, Judy was a third-year university student, and her majors were mathematics and biology. Although both of them were in the same year, Judy was 2 years older than Yuki.

In this study, my particular focus was on Yuki, who took my elective English course for one semester. Through looking closely at her interactions with Judy, I expected that I would examine the details of her out-of-class learning experiences. I also hoped to

understand better the relationship between her in-class and out-of-class learning through analyzing her reflections in the COIL project.

Communication Timeline

Their interaction started with Judy's email message to Yuki on October 21, 2019, and both Yuki and Judy communicated regularly until February 5, 2020. Their communication tools varied, but their primary means of communication was email. They also exchanged a physical card and a letter, and they had 14 exchanges in total (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. *Interchange Between Yuki and Judy (October, 2019–February, 2020)*

No.	Date	Sender	Communication Tool	Word Count
1	October 21 2019	Judy	Email message	114
2	October 24	Yuki	Email message	161
3	October 30	Judy	Email message	215
4	November 21	Yuki	Email message	134
5	November 27	Judy	Email message	255
6	December 2	Yuki	Email message	134
7	December 3	Judy	Email message	83
8	December 5	Yuki	Email message with a photo of a Christmas light display	51
9	December 11	Judy	Email message with a photo of a Christmas light display	84
10	December 17	Yuki	Email message	52
11	December 20	Yuki	Letter	81
12	December 25	Judy	Email message with a photo of animals	202
13	January 8 2020	Yuki	Email message	118
14	February 5	Judy	Letter	227

Data Collection

This research was exploratory in nature and employed a case study approach. More specifically, it was designed as a single-case study "to gain in-depth understanding replete with meaning for the subject, focusing on process rather than outcome, on discovery rather than confirmation" (Burns, 2000, p. 460). With written consent from both Yuki and Judy, all of their actual exchanges through email messages, cards, and letters were used for the analysis.

In addition to the data from the exchanges between the two, in May 2021 I conducted an interview with Yuki to serve as a reflection point on her thinking and decision-making (see Appendix for the interview guide). There was a possibility that Yuki had continuously engaged in the COIL project with Judy even after the English course was over. The interview with Yuki was held online on May 8, 2021, one and a half years after the project had ended. By that time, she had already graduated from the university, and about two months had passed since she had started out her career path. The semi-structured 45-minute interview with open-ended questions was conducted in Japanese, and the

transcript of the data was translated into English by the author. With Yuki's agreement, the interview was video-recorded for further analysis.

Results

In this section, the results obtained regarding the narrative inquiries are explained with Yuki's comments extracted from the interview, as well as from her and her partner's actual interchanges.

Yuki's Reasons for Joining the COIL Project

Yuki had mainly two reasons to participate in the COIL project. One is that she wanted to go to Finland. She had had a chance to go to North European countries with her mother when she was a second-year high school student. However, the tour did not include Finland, but she had hoped to go there. The other reason was to improve her English skills. According to Yuki, she had started online English conversation lessons on her own and had taken the lessons on a regular basis for 1 year, but she had decided to quit in October 2019, which was exactly when the COIL project was announced:

> I could not enjoy the online English conversation lessons and was not motivated either, although I took the lesson only once or twice a week. I was about to hate English. I was about to be bad at and dislike English.… I had mixed feelings. I didn't want to quit, but the booking system for the online English conversation lessons was troublesome. Every time I took a lesson, I had to book in advance. The online English conversation lessons were conducted on a one-on-one basis, but it was like what we call a "formal class," and I followed a set of materials with a teacher.

In the above excerpt Yuki expresses her mixed feelings that she had motivation to learn English but was bothered with the booking system. Moreover, the lesson style, which she defines as a "formal class," indicates that it was not flexible nor open to improvisation, and it was set up as originally planned. Coincidentally, it was in October 2019 that I announced the COIL project between Finnish and Japanese students in some of my classes. It seems to have been good timing for Yuki, who was reluctant to continue the online conversation lessons that she had been taking.

Yuki's Expectations

Yuki acknowledges that her primary expectation was to make friends with her Finnish partner. When she talked about that, Yuki immediately referred to an international student from Indonesia that she met in her high school days:

> When I was a second-year high school student, one Indonesian student came to my high school as an exchange student. We got to know each other and I even went to visit her in Indonesia.… Also, I joined an internship program in Malaysia in summer 2019. Although I stayed there for just one week, I met many Malaysian people and even took a Malaysian couple I had met there around when they visited Japan for their honeymoon.

Given her intercultural experiences, it could be said that Yuki is confident when interacting with foreigners and can adjust herself to a new environment. She commented that she wanted to visit Finland and invite her Finnish partner from the project to Japan. She had a very clear expectation and could easily visualize that she would be able to maintain a close relationship with her Finnish partner even after the project, as she was

able to do with her other international friends. At the end of the interview, she briefly mentioned that she had wanted to improve her English skills through the project as well. However, her detailed explanation of intercultural communication clearly demonstrates that her expectations were focused more on the social aspects rather than the cognitive or linguistic ones. Thus, the COIL project would have been another chance for her to meet and get to know an international student from Finland.

Effect of the Lack of Confidence on Yuki's Formality

Yuki also had a concern that was based on her lack of confidence in her English skills:

> My main concern was about grammar, and I wondered if I could communicate with my partner with my limited knowledge of grammar. . . . As we had email exchange mainly, I focused on formality and tried my best to write messages formally.

Email messages are both formal and informal, and they are used differently according to the purposes and recipients. However, for Yuki, it is obvious that email writing is strongly associated with formality. Figures 1 and 2 show Yuki and Judy's interchanges in the first few exchanges.

As Yuki explains, the use of the title "Ms." and full name in the first few messages exemplify the formality that she was eager to seek. Although all the messages include emoticons, both the style and content of the messages demonstrate the formality that Yuki emphasized in the interview.

In the very first message, Judy took the initiative and started to negotiate with Yuki about how to proceed with the project by asking some questions. In response to this, Yuki answered the questions and also added her self-introduction at the end of her message. The inclusion of the self-introduction might have worked as an icebreaker for them, and their communication style gradually became less formal and more friendly. The formality was lessened in the fourth exchange when Yuki suggested that Judy address Yuki by her first name, and from the fifth exchange onwards, they were on a first-name basis with each other.

Moreover, another change is observed in Yuki's response to Judy's questions. Yuki separated her answers in a question-and-answer format rather than answering in paragraph form. Yuki clearly has considered her own answers as a formal and suitable way to answer Judy's questions, while in usual practice, this style would be considered to be awkward and unsuitable for an informal friendly manner.

According to Yuki, their initial contact started with the premise that they would send letters to each other. They had already had a mutual agreement and exchanged their home addresses at the early stage of their interchange, in the third and fourth entries respectively. Moreover, their questions became more personalized, and their interaction was intensified as their interaction continued. In the fourth entry, Yuki asked follow-up questions about Judy's future dream to be a teacher, and in response, Judy also connected Helsinki to Tokyo in the fifth entry. In this way, both Yuki and Judy gradually co-constructed their own communication style as they shared personal information, showed empathy, and their different life experiences resonated with each other.

【1】October 21, 2019

Dear Fukuda Yuki,

I'm writing to you because of my English course in university of Helsinki. I'm interested in penpal and I have heard that you are interested it too. Would you like to do this penpal via email or real writing letters? I think that letters could be nice and fun, but email is okay for me too. And second question is that what we want to discuss in these letters. I suggest that in the first letter we could tell something about ourselves like who are we and our hobbies, studies etc. What you think about this? 😊

I'm looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards

Judy Watson

University of XXXXX

【2】October 24, 2019

Dear Judy Watson,

Hi, My name is Yuki Fukuda.

I'm sorry for the late reply.

I was really looking forward to doing penpal.

I am really happy to contact to you.

I will answer the questions.

Would you like to do this penpal via email or real writing letters? I think that letters could be nice and fun, but email is okay for me too.
→I think so too. Letters are very nice
I have never sent letters to any other countries so I want to try it!

And next,
I will introduce myself.
I am 21 years old woman.
I am third year college student at XXXXX University.
My majoring is economics.

And my hobby is watching movies, cooking and doing KARATE.
I like MARVEL movies.
Recently, I watched JOKER.
My part time job is making cream puff.
I have doing KARATE for 6years.
Nice to meet you😌

Could you tell me about yourself?🙂

Best regards

Yuki Fukuda

XXXXX University

Figure 1. First and Second Exchanges

【3】October 30, 2019

Hi Fukuda Yuki,

and thank you for your answer and it is nice to meet you too. 😊

I tell now something about myself:

> I'm 24 years old woman. I'm third year college student and I am completing my bachelor's degree this autumn. My major is mathematics and biology is my secondary subject. I'm studying in teacher training program so I'm going to be a subject teacher of math and biology. I'm interested in nature and I like to hike there. I like to watch movies and TV-series too. When I was a kid I played a piano and practiced cross-country skiing. Now I have a new hobby, horse riding. I also like sometimes go for a run or walk and sometimes I go to the gym.

I also give you my address, that you can write to me with real letters if you want to. So this is my name and address:

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

You can write to me for example what you want know about me or my country or if you want to tell me more about yourself and the topics you are interested in and ask questions and so on 😊 I am so interested to hear you more! 😊

Best regards

Judy Watson

University of XXXXX

【4】November 21, 2019

Ms. Judy Watson

Good evening 😊

Sorry late for replying.
I couldn't receive your mail 😭

Please call me Yuki or Yukki.

I think it's easy to write my name.

Thank you for your introduction.
Will you became a teacher in the future?
That's so cool 😳 😳
Which age do you plan to teach?

And You have so many hobbies!
I like nature too.
My image is Helsinki has big nature!
I live in Tokyo so there are very little nature 😢
I like to travel so I often go nature places.

I want to ask a lot of questions about your wealth of hobbies 😳 😳

Thanks for your address
I will send you a letter soon.

My home address:

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

I want to go Helsinki some day 😌

Sincerely,

Yuki Fukuda

Figure 2. Third and Fourth Exchanges

Yuki's Concern: Obsession With Accuracy

Both Yuki and Judy's first few interchanges demonstrate that they responded to each other within a few days and actively participated in the project. However, Yuki confesses that her obsession with accuracy remained strongly in her mind:

> It took time to write messages because I had to carefully check my English sentences again and again. I thought I should write proper English….I felt sorry for Judy because I couldn't respond to her immediately. I even felt pressed.

The excitement and enjoyment that Yuki had at the beginning of the project were gradually transformed to pressure, and this affected the length of her messages, as can be seen in the eighth and ninth entries.

In the eighth entry, Yuki included a photo of a Christmas light display in Tokyo. In the same manner, Judy shared a photo of Christmas lights in Helsinki in the next exchange. Both of them seemed to increase a feeling of closeness by responding and even sharing the photos that they took; however, the length of their messages, especially Yuki's, started getting shorter from the seventh exchange onwards (see Table 1). It should note that Yuki wrote less than Judy in general, but Yuki's word count was 143 words on average from the first to sixth exchange. On the other hand, she wrote about 50 words in her eighth and 10th exchanges, which were the email exchanges. Yuki reflected on the interchange:

> I was getting busier because of job hunting. I was tempted to stop writing to [Judy]….I said that the contributory factor was job hunting, but I might have been trying to make excuses for not writing to her due to job hunting. Because these were email messages, I thought I should write long messages. I have to respond to each question formally without any mistakes. That's why I took such an attitude.

As she talked through her COIL experiences, she admitted that she intentionally tried to attribute her infrequent contact with Judy to job hunting. However, her explanation revealed that she had a fixed image that her email messages should always be formal, lengthy, and error-free. Her strong consciousness of formality gradually forced her to lose enjoyment in communication, and her enthusiasm changed to pressure instead, resulting in her writing becoming shorter.

Yuki's Desire to Learn Casual Expressions

In spite of her strict consciousness towards accuracy, Yuki clearly said that she wanted to use casual English expressions that she had learned in class.

> I was thinking of using some expressions I learned in Prof. Hayashi's class [the author's class] like "It is freezing." I wanted to know those casual expressions. I didn't want to write each sentence carefully by checking, "What is the subject in this sentence?" and "What is a verb in that sentence?" every time I wrote the messages….I looked for some sites on the Internet to learn some casual expressions because what I learned in the school is English for entrance examinations.

Yuki had the intention and willingness to use casual expressions that she had previously learned in a class that she took with me in the 2019 academic year. The interview demonstrates that Yuki still remembered some expressions that she had learned 2 years earlier. However, her exchanges did not include any expressions that she had learned in the class. In Figure 3, both Yuki and Judy wrote about winter in each country, so Yuki could have included "It is freezing" or other expressions related to

weather or seasons that she had learned in the class. Given the fact that no expressions were included in her own writings, it could be said that she had not fully developed her skills to apply what she had learned to a new context. Alternatively, her strong obsession with accuracy was overwhelming, and this might have prevented her from using the expressions in a different context.

【8】December 11, 2019

Hi 😁

Judy ☺️

Tokyo was autumn until recently.
I attached picture.

Can you view the photo?

But now, it got colder as it approached winter 😷
Tokyo is not snowing, but other prefectures are snowing. ⛄

Thank you so much ☺️
I'll do my best 😳

I see!
I can send you a letter 😁

Sincerely,

Yuki

【9】December 11, 2019

Hi Yuki!

This is pic from city centre of Helsinki. We have Christmas illuminations here now. Unfortunately it wasn't snowy on that day, when I took this pic. We have had only few snowy days in this month.

My English course is over soon. What about your course? What you are thinking about this penpal? Do you want to continue still after our English courses or not? I think that this have been nice so I could continue writing with you. 😊

Best regards,

Judy

Figure 3. Eighth and Ninth Exchanges

Moreover, Yuki refers to the impact of university entrance examinations on English classes. In general, in their senior high school years, students in Japan have to study hard for university entrance exams, and this has major impacts on how both teachers and students approach English in class. Excessive emphasis on exam preparation can deprive students of chances to learn casual expressions. In light of this, Yuki's effort to search for informal expressions on the Internet showed her strong desire to learn and use those expressions in her writing.

Yuki's Changes and Her Ongoing Motivation After the COIL Project

Yuki reflected on changes that she had felt through the COIL project:

> Unlike TOEIC scores, there are no visible results, but I was happy with the fact that I could use English and communicate with [Judy] in English. The communication with [Judy] was different from that of online English conversation lessons. When it comes to online English conversation lessons, a partner is an adult and someone I do not know. Moreover, he or she is a teacher. However, my partner and I are in the same age group, and we have more things in common.

Comparing and contrasting online English conversation lessons and the COIL project, her focus was not on the product but the process, and she concluded that there was a considerable difference in enjoyment. As Yuki explains, she might not have expressed what she wanted to say or made herself understood as clearly as she wished, but the fact that she herself was using English enhanced her self-esteem.

Together with her pure enjoyment in the communication with Judy, Yuki's realization of her insufficient knowledge of English and her strong desire to learn casual expressions in English still helped her to maintain her motivation to study English and boost her determination to study English, and more specifically, casual English expressions.

> *Yuki:* I still continue to study casual expressions on my own even after the project.
> *Author:* Oh, you continue to study English at your own pace. That is great.
> *Yuki:* I've just started to work and cannot spare time as much as I want, though.
> *Author:* By the way, Yuki, if you had another chance to engage in a COIL project, is there anything that you would like to change?
> *Yuki:* I would like to communicate with my partner through Instagram, LINE, or Zoom. I thought I had to write a long message in email and letters and respond to each question that Judy asked me one by one. I put myself on guard, and it felt like a chore. But if I used, say, LINE, it would be easy to communicate.

Reflecting on her regret and frustration that she was unable to respond to Judy immediately, she came up later with the idea of using Instagram, LINE (a social media application widely used in Japan), or Zoom. Although Zoom involves video-conferencing, both Instagram and LINE are applications that would enable her to leave a message in just one or a few lines more quickly and casually without the pressure to respond to her partner. More importantly, she would be able to increase her knowledge of casual expressions by reading and responding to casual messages, which would consequently lead her to achieve her ultimate goal of enjoying intercultural communication.

Implications

The Finnish and Japanese COIL project was introduced as a completely out-of-class activity for two groups of university students. Holding both expectations of intercultural

communication and anxieties about her English language skills, Yuki embarked on the project with Judy and mutually engaged in the collaborative activity over 4 months. Their interaction started in a formal way, but they gradually changed their interaction pattern as they negotiated, responded, and related to each other. Without the teachers' guidance and intervention, both of them took responsibility for developing the process of communication between themselves.

Throughout the project, there were three challenges that Yuki had faced. Her desire to communicate with Judy, her lack of confidence in English, especially regarding casual expressions, and her obsession with formality and accuracy were intertwined intricately and gave a huge impact not only on the number of exchanges but also on the length, content, and format of her messages. Reflecting on my learning and teaching experiences in junior and senior high school as well as university in Japan (Hayashi et al., 2014), a majority of students face similar dilemmas and search for ways to overcome such difficulties. In order to maximize positive feelings, such as enthusiasm for intercultural communication, and minimize negative feelings that students tend to have in learning and using English, it is desirable to provide opportunities for them to learn casual expressions and to be aware that there are some differences between spoken and written English. As Yuki pointed out in the interview, informal English is less emphasized in formal education in Japan; students have few opportunities to learn and use casual expressions in a formal learning setting. Therefore, it is important to provide lessons or workshops for students to learn the difference between formal and informal email writing as an initial step. As for formal email writing, students tend to learn a specific format together with some formal expressions commonly used in a formal email message, such as "Dear," "Best regards," and "Would you please …?" On the other hand, shortened forms, such as "face-2-face," "BTW" [by the way], and "SMT" [sucking my teeth], that people use in daily digital communication can be dealt with as informal email writing. In this way, students would be able to maintain their awareness of both formality and informality and hopefully use them properly according to the situation. This would consequently enhance their communicative competence.

Another issue to consider is continuity. In this project, Yuki and Judy were considered to be the most successful pair of all the participants. However, as discussed previously, Yuki's written communication gradually decreased. In the interview, she said, "If there were an opportunity for an interim report, our interchange would have lasted much longer." For some pairs, intervention or monitoring by teachers could be effective, and it could work as a motivator, as some students work much better within a framework set up by teachers. On the other hand, others might prefer to construct their own project together as they establish their own communication styles with their partners. It is important for teachers to judge whether to intervene or not in a project by carefully examining students' personalities and motivation in order to maximize the possibilities for exchanges among students.

In addition, the results of this case study imply a potential for the COIL project as an alternative to conventional study abroad programs. Due to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020, most universities around the world were unable to send their students to their affiliated universities in other countries or to welcome international students from overseas. In many cases, students who had planned to study abroad before the pandemic started to postpone or change their plans, and in the worst case, they even had to completely give up their long-standing dreams. However, COIL projects can

enable students to experience intercultural communication even if they stay in their home countries.

Overall, this study was successful in filling the research gap by exploring in detail the process by which Yuki and Judy collaborated in an out-of-class setting. Given the nature of the case study, the results cannot be generalized, but they help us to understand Yuki's experiences and perceptions through her reflection. For further study, it would be interesting to have Judy reflect on her own experiences through interviews and analyze her reflections together with those of Yuki to fully understand the experiences that both of them jointly shared. Moreover, identifying both successful and unsuccessful factors that encouraged or discouraged the pairs of students who engaged in the project would help to identify the necessary support and appropriate guidance for future programs that prioritize out-of-class student activity and communication.

Conclusion

The original COIL project was introduced and carried out between two groups of university students in Finland and Japan. The focus in this case study on one Japanese student's communication with her Finnish partner student has let us understand the benefits of introducing a COIL project as an out-of-class learning activity to encourage learning beyond the classroom. Throughout the project, both Yuki and Judy took initiative and collaborated without intervention from the instructors; they jointly took ownership and responsibility for their mutual out-of-class learning. In short, the COIL project helped to foster collaborative learner autonomy across countries.

In addition, this case study sheds light on the necessity of learning and using both formal and informal English to foster better communication. In this project, Yuki's preoccupation with being formal and accurate in her writing, and her desire to be able to express her ideas fluently swung like a pendulum within herself. Yuki's realization of her insufficient knowledge of English gradually made her lose her enthusiasm for the project, which was consequently reflected in her increasingly infrequent participation and shorter messages. However, her strong determination to study casual English expressions increased, and this did not demotivate her or keep her away from English. Rather, it worked positively and drove her to make an effort to develop her English skills, which lasted for a further one and a half years after the project was over. Voluntary participation in the COIL project enabled her not only to be aware of her strengths and weaknesses but also to specify her needs in terms of English skills. Looking to the future, this will hopefully have long-lasting benefits for her continuing autonomous and lifelong learning.

Author Bio

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Review Process

This paper was open-reviewed by Alice Chik and Donna Fujimoto of the *Learner Development Journal* Review Network and by the Journal Steering Group. *(Contributors have the option of open or blind review.)*

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Tell me exactly why you decided to participate in this project.
2. How long have you been communicating with your paired partner?
3. How many times in total?
4. How did the exchanges take place?
5. Tell me the details of your interactions.
6. Are there any expectations that you had before participating in the project? If so, what are they?
7. Did you have any concerns before participating? If so, what are they?
8. Was there anything that left an impression on you during the project? If so, please tell me about it.
9. Did you have any concerns during the project?
10. Did you experience any changes as a result of the project?
11. Did you try to use or apply what you learned in class during the project?
12. What were your impressions of the project?
13. Is there any reason why you ended the project after 4 months?
14. If you were to resume, how would you like to do it again?