

Benefits of Online International Exchange

— Can Japanese Students Improve their English Proficiency and Build Cultural Awareness Online? —

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1. Abstract

We conducted two different online events for Okayama University of Science (OUS) students and our partner university, Mapúa University (MU) students in the Philippines. We analyzed the effectiveness of the international online interactions by having the participants fill out a survey.

Overall, students responded positively to the event and expressed interest in participating again. Furthermore, OUS students reported that their interaction with MU students encouraged them to speak English more freely and aroused their interest in traveling abroad.

2. Introduction

For about 40 years, OUS has been conducting international interactions mainly with academic institutions in the United States, Brazil, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines every year. As globalization becomes more prevalent in the world, leadership skills, mastery of foreign languages, and the ability to understand diverse values and cultures become vital. Therefore, the Global Education Development Center (GEDC) was established on campus in 2016 to foster global human resources and promote more active exchanges with overseas countries. We are engaged in various activities based on the three pillars of (1) study abroad support, (2) International Baccalaureate, and (3) internationalization of the campus. Since the establishment of the center, we have been promoting and publicizing study abroad programs on campus, raising awareness of international exchange, and guiding students toward campus globalization. As a result, we can say we have gradually increased the awareness of globalization across our

campus. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all incoming and outgoing overseas programs were suspended, bringing opportunities to travel abroad for students to a complete halt.

Although Japan is an advanced country, it lags in digitalization and lacks the technology and knowledge to smoothly transition to online classes and activities. We, the faculty and staff of GEDC, have given serious thought to what we could offer students and maintain students' interest in globalization while unable to go abroad or participate in in-person events and activities. Anyone who has lived abroad can understand that some things could be learned only through direct, firsthand experience. However, when considering what could be gained from studying abroad and examining what can and cannot be substituted online, we agreed that much can be gained online such as (1) improved communication skills, (2) a sense of independence, (3) a challenge spirit, (4) global perspective through cross-cultural-experiences, and (5) language skills.

We jointly held two different online events with our partner university, MU in the Philippines, and conducted a post-event survey to analyze whether the participants gained the above from their experience.

3. Methods

3-1 Time

3-1-1 English Party

Three online English language events, each consisting of an opening ceremony, four sessions, and a closing ceremony, held from July 2020 to March 2021 on the following dates:

[First] July 6,8,10,13,15, and 17, 2020

[Second] November 30, December 2,4,7,9, and 11, 2020

[Third] March 15,17,19,22,24, and 26, 2021

3-1-2 Gateway to MU and OUS Life

One-day online event, where students from both universities listened to five OUS and four MU faculty members from different departments give lectures in English in their areas of specialty, followed by a five-minute Q&A session. Event took place on March 8, 2021.

3-2 Participants

3-2-1. English Party

Faculty, staff, and students from OUS and MU participated in opening and closing ceremonies. Students from both universities organized four sessions and met to discuss different topics.

[First] 9 OUS students, 17 MU students.

[Second] 15 OUS students, 15 MU students

[Third] 23 OUS students, 46 MU students

3-2-2 Gateway to MU and OUS Life

30 OUS participants (students, faculty, and staff), 123 MU students participated in the event.

3-3 Event Design

3-3-1 English Party

To help students learn English, we try to find ways that enable them to develop language skills. There is a common belief among many Japanese students that they are not good at English or cannot speak English. Any native English speaker who has stepped foot into an English class in many schools in Japan can observe that the goal of learning English is not for communication but rather passing an entrance exam for higher education. Therefore, instead of focusing on grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary-building, we decided to build programs considering the following:

1. Developing the participants' ability to express themselves using the English vocabulary they have.
2. Setting the themes for each session and sharing them with the participants in advance to let them gather information related to the themes.
3. Selecting a theme that touches on both countries' cultural aspects so that participants can improve cross-cultural understanding.
4. Reducing participants' reluctance to give presentations in English as there will be more chances to have visualized meetings compared to before the pandemic.
5. Improving participants' English conversation skills to respond quickly by including themes that cannot be prepared in advance and require them to think and convey their ideas on the spot.

There was an opening ceremony attended by all students, faculty, and staff from both institutions. Each OUS student was assigned one or two "buddies" from MU to form small groups. To make it easier for those with regular university classes to participate, each group was instructed to decide day and time to meet that was compatible with their academic schedules. The progress of each group was observed by recording their meetings and assessing them later. The themes were decided by faculty and staff from OUS and MU. The themes are as shown in Table 1. Each participant received a Certificate of Completion at the closing ceremony.

Table 1. English Party Themes

Themes			
Day	English Party 1	English Party 2	English Party 3
Day 1	My Favorite Things <i>Buddies discuss things they like (color, food, books, hobbies, etc.), may use realia.</i>		Describe Yourself with ABCs <i>Example: I'm an <u>animal</u> lover. My family say I'm a <u>bookworm</u>, and my friends call me a <u>comedian</u>.</i>
Day 2	Tea for Two <i>OUS students explain an aspect of tea ceremony to their buddies.</i>	Watch Party <i>Participants watch a movie via Zoom and discuss in buddy groups.</i>	Cultural Traditions <i>Buddies talk about traditional holidays and festivals.</i>
Day 3	Popular Foods <i>Students talk about popular foods in Philippines and Japan and present how they are prepared.</i>	Filipino and Japanese Traditional/Common Games <i>Buddies talk about games played in their countries.</i>	Short Film, Q & A <i>Show & Tell: buddies show a video from their favorite media and discuss.</i>
Day 4	Be My Guest <i>Students take their buddies on a virtual tour of each other's university and/or city.</i>	The Latest Fads <i>Buddies discuss what is popular in their countries.</i>	

3-3-2 Gateway to MU and OUS life

The motivation of language learning changes when students realize the target language is a tool for communicating across culture lines instead of a school subject required for graduation. One reason for starting English Party was to give students lacking the confidence to speak English the opportunity to build fluency independent of a classroom environment.

Technological advances have normalized collaborative education and research among academia, NPOs, and corporate entities. Language learning programs such as ours can play an essential role at the nexus of these paradigms. Therefore, universities must become more proactive and creative in how they offer students international exchange opportunities while training faculty and staff to build the skills and teamwork

necessary for this endeavor. To achieve this, we asked for cooperation from faculty members in charge of activities and events for students visiting from overseas at MU.

Since MU is a famous engineering university in the Philippines, the event targeted OUS engineering students for the first leg. The program consists of an introduction to each university, lectures, and follow-up question-and-answer sessions. The outline of the program is shown in Table 2. Students who participated until the end of the Webinar received a completion certificate by scanning the QR code upon completion.

Table 2. Timetable: Gateway to MU and OUS life

Time (JST)	Description
10:45-11:00	Universities' videos showing
11:00-11:10	Introduction to OUS
11:10-11:20	Introduction to MU
11:20-11:25	Opening Remarks
11:25-11:45	OUS Lecture 1: 'Environmentally Benign Photo-catalyzed Reductive Desulfonylation'
11:45-12:05	MU Lecture 1: 'Hydro-de-chlorination of p-dichlorobenzene in Aqueous Media using Palladium Nanoparticle Immobilized on Various Resin Supports as Catalyst'
12:05-12:25	OUS Lecture 2: 'Home-based Rehabilitation Devices Using Various Pneumatic Soft Actuators'
12:25-12:45	OUS Lecture 3: 'Optimization of Bone Drill Geometry'
12:45-13:05	MU Lecture 2: 'Advocating Autonomy in the Field of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering'
13:05-14:00	Lunch Time Break
14:00-14:20	OUS Lecture 4: 'Protection of the World Heritage Town of Levuka, Fiji'
14:20-14:40	MU Lecture 3: 'Vernacular Houses in the Northern Philippines'
14:40-15:00	OUS Lecture 5: 'Natural Convection in a Cube Below Atmospheric Pressure'
15:00-15:20	MU Lecture 4: 'Optimizing Plant Microbial Fuel Cells for Concurrent Agriculture and Bioelectricity Generation'
15:20-	Closing Remarks

3-4 Post-Event Survey

3-4.1 English Party

We distributed a follow-up questionnaire to OUS students who participated in the event. The questions are as follows:

- (1) Tell us about any problems you had or improvements you would like to make to

improve future events.

- (2) Tell us what was good about this event.
- (3) If there is a similar event in the future, would you like to participate in it?
- (4) If there is a similar event in the future, would you recommend it to your friends?
- (5) Additional comments.

3-4.2 Gateway to MU and OUS life

We distributed a second follow-up questionnaire to participants from both universities who participated in the event. The questions are as follows:

- (1) How did you like the event?
- (2) What kind of theme would you suggest for future colloquia?
- (3) What kind of collaborative projects would you hope to have in the future?
- (4) Additional comments.

4. Results

In this section, we analyze how both online events impacted students based on their responses to anonymous questionnaires they received after both events.

4-1 English Party

The number of respondents for each leg is as follows:

First leg*: 9 respondents

Second leg**: 11 respondents

Third leg***: 16 respondents

The responses below are translations placed in various categories and listed the chronological order.

- (1) Tell us about any problems you had or improvements you would like to make to improve future events.

Duration

- Communication with MU students was insufficient in some parts, not enough time for conversation for all members in the group sessions.*
- Four themes were too many. **
- I would have liked to have talked with other buddies. Duration was longer, or the frequency increased. ***
- Prefer more time to talk. ***
- Two weeks was too short. We could talk more and get to know each other better if event were longer. ***
- Buddies and OUS students could introduce themselves at the opening ceremony. ***

OUS students clearly enjoyed conversing with MU students so much they wanted to extend future events even during the third leg.

Technical

- I couldn't screenshot the final certificate at the closing ceremony.*
- Have some countermeasure for the noise. ***

Some students lack knowledge on how to use their devices (smart phones, tablets, laptop and desktop PCs), and navigating Zoom. There were also issues with internet reliability.

Communication

- Advanced notification for sudden changes.*
- Prepare before the event**
- I couldn't get in at first because I didn't know the Zoom password. **
- This time, there were three in a group. Trouble coordinating the schedule for three people. Decide next meeting time so the Zoom link can be sent in advance.***

While there were issues with getting information to students in a timely manner, some students did not proactively seek information needed to participate.

Language

- There were times when I felt I needed help from someone who spoke Japanese.***
- Describe Yourself with ABCs was ok. Free self-introduction would be better.***

Students were encouraged to enjoy using English, however, it never occurred to some that they were free to use a dictionary. We realized that "Describe Yourself with ABCs" activity was difficult and did not use it again.

Other

- Forgot about the time difference and had a little trouble.*
- Nothing special. *

(2) Tell us what was good about this event.

Buddies

- My buddies were very cheerful and kind.*
- The buddies were all good people.*
- I was able to make friends overseas, and I think I got the hang of speaking English.*
- My buddy made the start time work for me.*
- I was able to talk a lot with my buddy, spend a lot of time together, learn a lot about each other, and have a lot of fun, and we became friends.**
- It was good to have two buddies for each OUS student. I think one-on-one has its advantages, but I felt like I could have more fun and feel more at ease. ***
- Both of my buddies were kind, and although my English was poor, they waited for me to speak and were very thoughtful. ***
- I had two buddies, so it was lively and a lot of fun. ***

Students enjoyed communicating in English with people their own age and similar academic interests.

English Opportunity

- It was good that I could try using English not for study; but, as conversation. I was grateful that a schedule was set for us because it's hard to decide on my own. If I had to do it myself, I'd never do it.*
- I was able to talk in English with people who live overseas and with who I don't usually have the chance to interact. Also, through this experience, I was able to learn about food culture, religion, clothing, the landscape and interior of MU, and many other details. We even exchanged LINE.*
- The opportunity to speak English. ***
- I was able to have a conversation with people living overseas. ***
- I usually struggled with saying phrases in English that are often used in Japanese. I was grateful for having the opportunity to try and think of other ways to say something instead of saying nothing at all. ***
- I'm glad we were able to have conversations almost every day, not only on the days we were supposed to. I'm glad we did it over spring break. ***
- It gave me a chance to learn English. ***

Many English curricula at junior and senior high schools in Japan place emphasis on grammar, communication, and reading comprehension to prepare students for entrance examinations to higher learning. Little to none is placed on usage and conversation. English Party enabled students to freely use English on their own terms.

Confidence and Skill

- We were divided into groups, so we were able to talk a lot. I think it helped me to improve my English listening skills a little.*
- Compared to previous events, I have a stronger hope to be able to speak in English. **
- My English skills have improved a little. **
- I was able to make friends and have the mental strength to converse in English.***
- I've learned to respond a little more quickly when speaking English. ***
- Interacting in groups and one-on-one helped me learn how to speak and listen at the same time. ***

Because the sessions were held in small groups, OUS students were able to express themselves in English. By holding multiple sessions with the same members, a relationship of trust was created, which reduced the fear of making mistakes and led to confidence in speaking.

Organization

- The content was well structured to have fun participating even if you don't speak English well.*

- I liked the way we could set the time on our own. **
- I was able to work with more different buddies than I had in the past. **
- We were provided with a way of communicating the topics, a sample PowerPoint presentation, and notes in advance, which made it easy to prepare. By interacting with my buddy, I learned how to communicate with others, paraphrase and read aloud, share images and videos via Zoom, and use body language. **
- The three people grouped up worked better. ***
- Since we worked in groups of three, we were able to follow each other, and everything seemed to go smoothly. ***

By setting themes, students with low confidence in their English-speaking skills could prepare in advance. OUS students and their buddies could schedule and prepare for their sessions on their own. Starting from the second leg, we had orientation sessions with students about intercultural communication and advice on how to prepare for their sessions, which we hoped students would find helpful.

Other

- My hope to visit the Philippines has become even stronger. ***
- I learned a lot about the Philippines. ***
- It was great to learn not only English, but also about Filipino culture and fads. ***

(3) If there is a similar event in the future, would you like to participate in it?

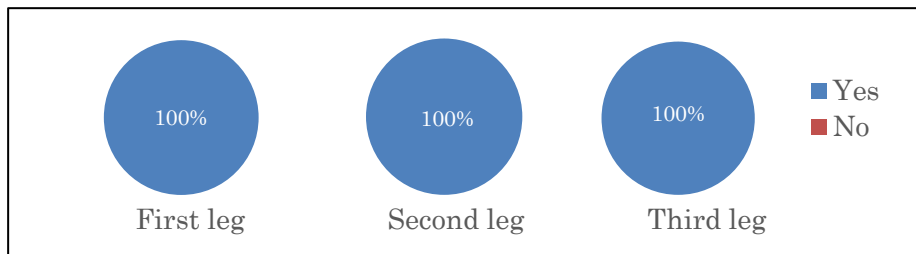


Figure 1. Future Participation

All students answered 'yes,' indicating they were satisfied with English Party enough to participate again.

(4) If there is a similar event in the future, would you recommend it to your friends?

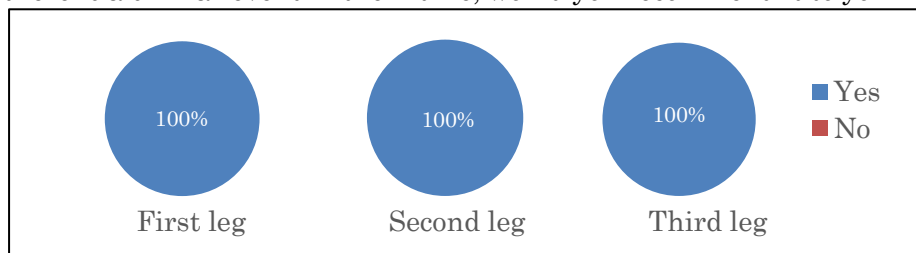


Figure 2. Recommend to Friends

All students answered ‘yes,’ meaning they felt English Party was effective enough that they were willing to suggest the activity to others.

(5) Additional comments.

- Even after the regular face-to-face classes start, I hope it will occasionally be event like this one using Zoom.*
- If there is another event like this, I would love to participate.*
- I was not used to speaking English at all and was worried, but as everyone treated me with kindness, I realized that it was my own fear and came to understand I could make things happen by changing my way of thinking. Through this event, I realized my fears kept me from using English. I do not want to give up. I want to keep challenging myself. This experience encouraged me to move forward in my life, looking firmly ahead.*
- I could think and speak a little better than last time, but I’m not quite ready to say I can speak well yet. I’ll keep working on it. ***
- I am now more interested in the Philippines, and plan to visit my buddy and the people at MU in the future. I also realized that we could communicate with each other even though we come from different countries, cultures, and languages. ***
- Thank you very much for organizing such a valuable event when it is difficult to travel freely. ***

The online event served as motivation for students to learn or improve their English.

4-2 Gateway to MU and OUS life

A total of 13 participants from both universities responded to questionnaires. All responses were written in English.

(1) How did you like the event?

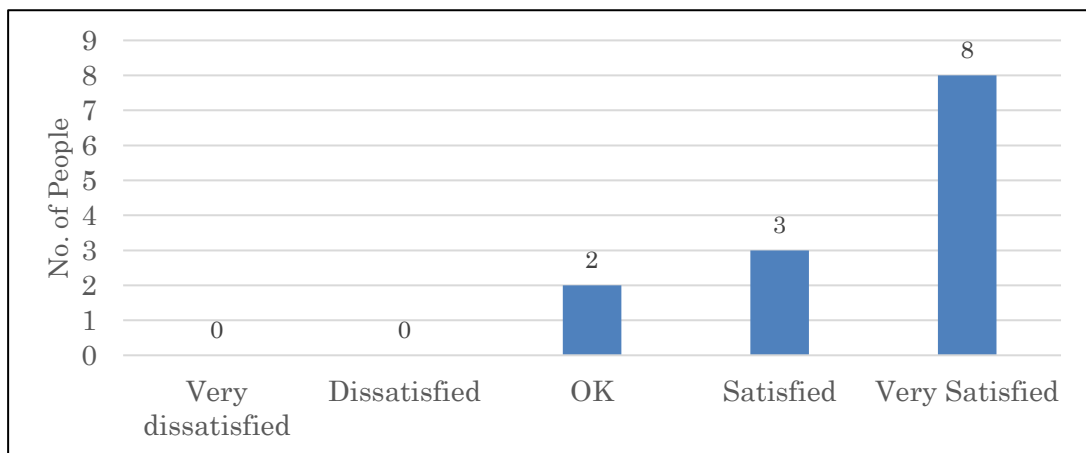


Figure 3. Participant Satisfaction with Event

All respondents rated the event 'OK' or higher. It is not known why so few students responded to the survey.

(2) What kind of theme would you suggest for future colloquia?

- Student life
- Academic specialties
- Student workload and club organizations that relate to specific majors
- I would like to understand how research is done across disciplines and how collaborative research is done with in institutions in other countries.
- Cultures, nature, and vacations
- About school life in the Philippines
- How different industries are coping with the COVID-19 pandemic

(3) What kind of collaborative projects would you hope to have in the future?

- Anything that is very educational
- Career and academic hacks
- Collaboration work presentation between international and local students
- Case Studies
- Exchange of ideas
- Communication between students at partner universities
- Webinars
- Announce the results of joint research between MU and OUS.
- Student life, cultures, nature, and vacations
- Robotics-related projects
- It would be nice to have regular events.

(4) Additional comments.

- More webinars
- Thank you for the opportunity to attend the event.

5. Discussion

We examined and analyzed the potential of international online exchange and its impact on participants through two different events.

According to feedback, most of the participants responded favorably, saying that they no longer feel hesitant about using English, want more opportunities to meet buddies (more themes), and would like to participate again. When reviewing video footage of events, we observed participants using visual aids such as PowerPoint presentations and videos in their interactions, especially at English Party. On the other hand, as for the Gateway to MU and OUS life, the Webinar, although there was time for Q&A after each lecture, there was no active participation. It suggests that the program

was not designed so that the participants could have a sense of involvement.

Possibilities for future events:

- Instead of having nine lectures in one day, expand event over two to four days.
- Allow participants to choose which lecture(s) they wish to hear beforehand and have Q&A with the lecturer.
- Allow students to present their own research and receive feedback from peers.

6. Conclusions

Having these two different online events with MU may have lowered participants' reluctance to join the second event.

Holding several English Party events increased interest in improving English-speaking skills among OUS students. The number of participants who were willing to participate in the Webinar, an educational event, increased as they became less reluctant to communicate with people overseas. Traditionally, overseas exchanges involve traveling to a host country and doing activities in person, but having seen the educational benefits of our online exchanges, we can expand the scope of this program to include students who, for whatever reason, could not travel overseas.

There is a need to provide a hybrid international exchange program by considering the benefits of both face-to-face and online interaction. In the future, rather than considering each event individually, it is necessary to integrate international exchange activities and create a system that allows students to take the initiative to participate.

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