

Discourse Junction: The Language and Culture Connection

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(1) Purpose

This research project set out to trial an in-house language exchange program at Saitama University—addressing the identified need of providing students with opportunities to participate in one-on-one authentic cross-cultural interactions.

(2) Significance

A large number of students at Saitama University embark on overseas study. As such, prior to departure, students wishing to study abroad would benefit enormously from participating in events that have been designed specifically to bolster the skills of communication and cross-cultural interaction. Crucially, this project provides students with much-needed opportunities to participate in authentic one-on-one, face-to-face, second-language communication situations—‘ordinary conversation’ being a productive environment for language learning (Kasper 2004; Markee 2000). In addition, visiting international students to the Saitama University campus are able to meet Japanese students—in the process exchanging their own native languages and cultures, as well as being provided with the chance to further develop their Japanese language skills in a naturalistic setting outside of the classroom. Once viable within Saitama University, the program could be expanded to operate internationally—allowing, for example, international students of Saitama University to participate in an exchange of language and culture with local students of Saitama University prior to arriving in Japan.

(3) Uniqueness

This project is unique as it utilizes computer-mediated communication (CMC) during implementation to connect language learners. CMC provides versatility for language learning in the EFL setting where learners often do not have any opportunity to interact in authentic situations. CMC also allows for textual, graphical and pictorial resources to be incorporated into interactions, distinguishing it from face-to-face talk.

(4) Research Process

With generous assistance from the Saitama University Center for International Exchange, visiting students from abroad were contacted directly and asked if they would be willing to volunteer as language exchange participants. Those that agreed to participate were then paired with Japanese students seeking opportunities for language practice and cultural exchange.

Stage 1: Initially via networked computers on campus, in a video-chat environment, pairs met and conversed in English for a period of approximately 20mins. Topic choice was not restricted—students were free to manage their own interactions independently.

Stage 2: A second campus-based meeting was organized for each pair—this time being in person (i.e., face-to-face *without* computers). Each pair conversed in Japanese during the second meeting to satisfy the requirements of the language exchange program. Neither time limits nor topic restrictions were imposed.

Stage 3: Following Stages 1 and 2, each participant completed a reflective questionnaire—designed to explicate and explore involvement in the language exchange program from an emic perspective.

(5) Participants

A total of 38 volunteers participated in the language exchange program—including 19 Japanese (Kanto $n=13$; Kyushu $n=1$; Tohoku $n=4$; Tokai $n=1$) and 19 international students (Australia $n=4$; England $n=2$; Germany $n=4$; South Korea $n=1$; Thailand $n=2$; USA $n=6$).

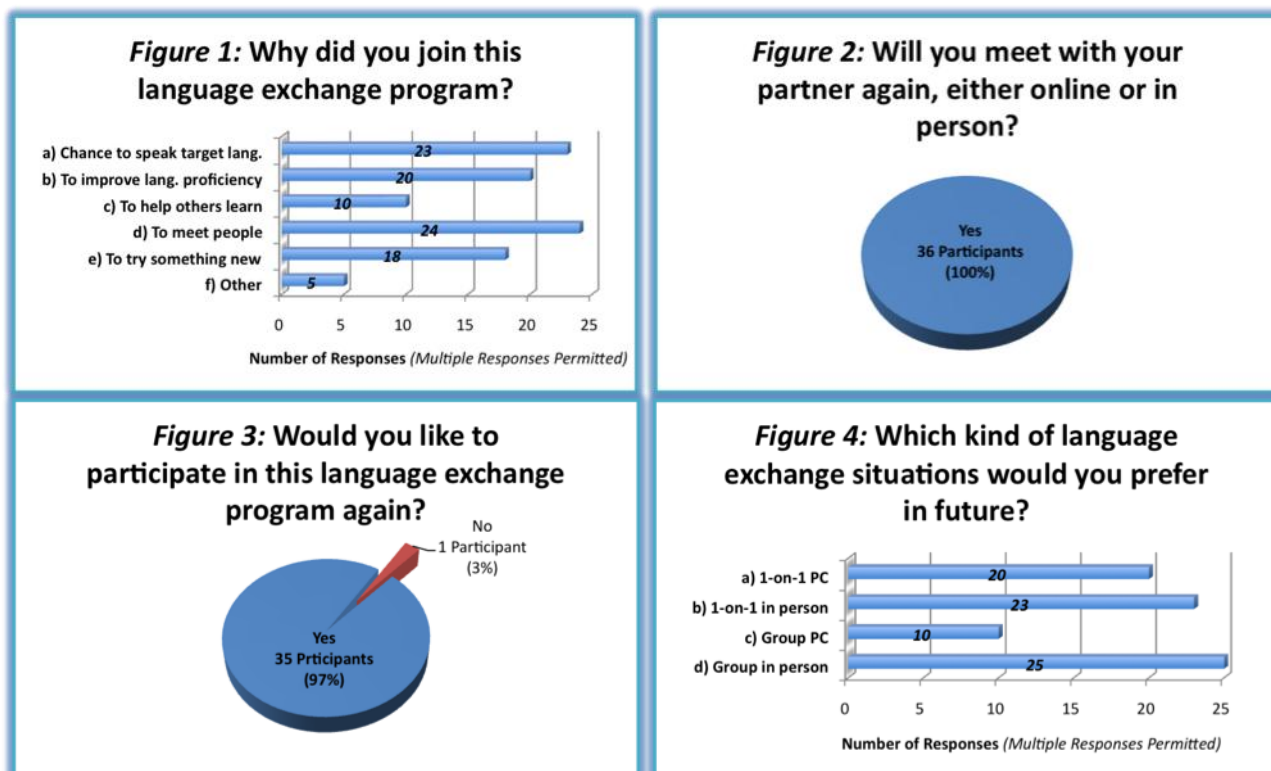
(6) Results

From the 38 participants, a total of 36 questionnaires were returned. Analysis revealed the following:

- [6.1] During Stage 1, the student participants enjoyed the opportunity to meet each other online—indicating that the process was: ‘Very easy’ $n=15$; ‘Easy’ $n=13$; ‘Difficult’ $n=8$; ‘Very difficult’ $n=0$.
- [6.2] Participants also enjoyed meeting their partner in person on campus, during Stage 2—indicating that the process was: ‘Very easy’ $n=17$; ‘Easy’ $n=14$; ‘Difficult’ $n=4$; ‘Very difficult’ $n=1$. NB: The response rated as ‘Very difficult’ was clarified through written comments—this student’s language exchange partner was too busy to meet in person after repeated attempts.
- [6.3] In comparison to computer-based language exchange, the majority of students preferred to meet and communicate in person—indicating that in-person communication was more straightforward, simpler and clearer (‘Prefer talking on computers’ $n=6$; ‘Prefer talking in person’ $n=30$). However, participants did note that by commencing the language exchange program in a CMC environment (i.e., Stage 1) anxiety and tension were lessened with regard to the initial in-person face-to-face encounter (i.e., Stage 2).
- [6.4] Respondents sought out the opportunity to participate in the language exchange program for a variety of

reasons—predominantly to meet new people, to have an opportunity to speak the target language (i.e., ‘English’ for Japanese participants; ‘Japanese’ for international participants) and to have the chance to improve target language proficiency (*Fig. 1*).

- [6.5] Without exception the participants indicated that they would like to meet their exchange partners again, for continued chances to practice intercultural communication and to improve linguistic skills (*Fig. 2*).
- [6.6] Overwhelmingly the volunteers seek further opportunities for language exchange (*Fig. 3*). NB: Just one respondent indicated that she could not participate in additional exchange events due to fourth-year study commitments.
- [6.7] Respondents indicate that they are open to a variety of settings for interaction, particularly ‘in person’ gatherings—however one-on-one, face-to-face CMC also rated highly (*Fig. 4*).



(7) Conclusions, Recommendations and Future Directions

Involvement in the language exchange program was enjoyable and rewarding for participants, as indicated by detailed questionnaire feedback. Clearly, as this small study has highlighted, both local Japanese students *and* the visiting international student body want more cultural exchange and language practice opportunities.

However, it must be noted that responses to the questionnaire call attention to the fact that students at Saitama University currently lack chances to participate in one-on-one authentic cross-cultural interactions. Japanese respondents, on the whole, do not have frequent enough opportunities to speak English (and/or other second languages) (‘A weekly chance’ $n=7$; ‘A monthly chance or less’ $n=11$). Likewise, despite living on campus, international students ought to have more frequent formal opportunities to participate in authentic Japanese conversation situations outside of the language classroom. Visiting students do not have frequent enough opportunities to speak Japanese (‘A weekly chance’ $n=8$; ‘A monthly chance or less’ $n=10$).

Therefore, based on the reflections of the volunteer student participants and myself (the coordinator of this study) with regard to the above trial language exchange program, a sustainable campus-based system for the practice of cross-cultural communication ought to be designed and implemented. In doing so, as procedures and frameworks are improved and refined, a handbook for coordinators and participants ought to be produced. Such a manual would provide interested parties with all-important guidance concerning CMC and language exchange system design—drawing attention to potential problems and solutions, advice, procedures, techniques, recommended software and technical considerations.

Works Cited

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