CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN ASIA USING ONLINE COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND THE DIALOGBOOK

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ABSTRACT

The significance of intercultural communication has steadily increased in today's global era. However, partly due to Japan's remote geographic location, it is difficult for Japanese people to travel abroad; this is especially true for the younger generations. Since 2020, we have been conducting the Students Meet Internationally through Learning English (SMILE) project to offer opportunities for Japanese students to communicate with other students living in foreign countries. In the SMILE project, students use the online meeting tools to communicate with each other and the Dialogbook, which was developed as a learning portfolio system, to record and support their learning activities. This paper provides an overview of the project and explains the current situation.

KEYWORDS

Cross-Cultural Education, Online Communication Tools, Learning Portfolio System, Dialogbook

1. INTRODUCTION

With the vast and pervasive spread of internet technologies, global communication infrastructure has become a commodity; global communication is now a necessity for businesspeople who work internationally. In addition, since the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic prevented physical overseas travel, we have become accustomed to using online communication tools, such as Zoom, Webex, Skype, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams.

Under these circumstances, the significance of cross-cultural education, which enables students to engage in intercultural communication, has steadily increased. To provide such an education, several pedagogical methods have been proposed. One such method is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which is expected to foster intercultural understanding. For example, Yang (2021) showed that content-driven CLIL learners obtained slightly higher cultural quotient scores than their language-driven CLIL English-major peers.

The Collaborative Online International Language (COIL; Appiah-Kubi, 2020) is also a typical method of learning international communication in English. However, COIL programs are led mainly by western communities; since many western languages are similar to English, learning English communication is relatively easy for them. However, eastern languages, including Japanese, are very different from western languages. Therefore, learning English could be more difficult for eastern students than for those from the west.

For eastern people like the authors of this paper, it is essential to learn English as the lingua franca. Considering this, the Students Meet Internationally through Learning English (SMILE) project was established to offer Japanese students the opportunity to communicate with other students living in foreign countries (Wakabayashi et al., 2021). The SMILE project started in the academic year (AY) 2020 and is currently in its third year. In this project, students communicate with each other using online meeting tools. Additionally, to record and support students' learning activities, we developed the Dialogbook (Iio and Wakabayashi, 2020).

This paper provides an overview of the SMILE project, the current situation, and the future vision of the project.

2. THE SMILE PROJECT

This section provides a brief introduction to the project.

2.1 An Overview of the Project

As described previously, the SMILE project was created to provide opportunities for students from Japan and its neighboring countries to communicate with each other using online meeting tools. The distinctive features of the project are as follows:

1. Cross-cultural education is conducted between Japanese and foreign schools; the counterpart schools are mainly chosen from Japan's neighboring countries.

2. International communication is conducted using online meeting tools, where two or three students participate from both sides.

3. The project offers specific programs, starting with the preparation and ending with the reflection; it includes at least three online communication lessons and employs coordinators who support the classes.

4. The aim of the project is not only to provide opportunities for learning cross-cultural communication for students but also to allow teachers the experience of facilitating such lessons.
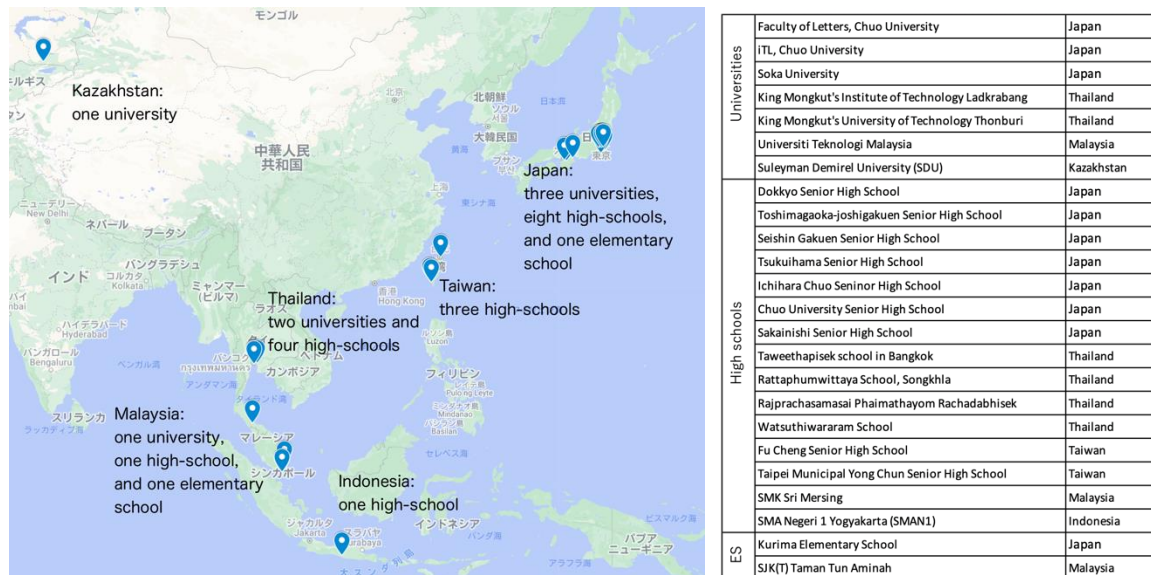

	School	Country
Universities	Faculty of Letters, Chuo University	Japan
	iTL, Chuo University	Japan
	Soka University	Japan
	King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang	Thailand
	King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi	Thailand
	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	Malaysia
	Suleyman Demirel University (SDU)	Kazakhstan
High schools	Dokkyo Senior High School	Japan
	Toshimagaoka-joshigakuen Senior High School	Japan
	Seishin Gakuen Senior High School	Japan
	Tsukuihama Senior High School	Japan
	Ichihara Chuo Seninor High School	Japan
	Chuo University Senior High School	Japan
	Sakainishi Senior High School	Japan
	Taweethapisek school in Bangkok	Thailand
	Rattaphumwittaya School, Songkhla	Thailand
	Rajprachasamasai Phaimathayom Rachadabhisek	Thailand
	Watsuthiwararam School	Thailand
	Fu Cheng Senior High School	Taiwan
	Taipei Municipal Yong Chun Senior High School	Taiwan
	SMK Sri Mersing	Malaysia
	SMA Negeri 1 Yogyakarta (SMAN1)	Indonesia
ES	Kurima Elementary School	Japan
	SJK(T) Taman Tun Aminah	Malaysia

Figure 1. The map (left) and the list (right) of the schools participating in the SMILE project in AY 2022

2.1.1 Participating Schools

Figure 1 is a map containing the locations of the schools participating in the SMILE project. In AY 2022, approximately 500 students from six universities, seventeen high schools, and two elementary schools from Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Kazakhstan, and Indonesia, will participate in the project. The fundamental criteria for choosing the counterpart countries are: 1. the time difference with Japan should be two or three hours at most, and 2. they should be non-English native countries.

It is relatively difficult to make the schedule for the communication classes because of the differences in education systems; daily timetables and school year calendars between the participating countries deviate. Therefore, choosing counterpart schools from countries with minor time differences is preferable. In addition, countries with minor time differences easily accommodate real-time online communication.

It is also significant that the counterpart countries should be non-English native countries. We choose the counterpart schools from the east-Asian and south-east Asian countries, excluding Singapore, Hongkong, and the Philippines. The project considers English to be a lingua-franca and global communication tool. Hence, both parties should not be native English speakers or use English as a daily conversation tool. Several third

parties in Japan provide English conversation training programs outside of schools. Nevertheless, most students lack the chance to meet other students of their generation who are not native English speakers. In that sense, our project can provide students with better opportunities than others.

2.1.2 Online Group Meetings

When international communication classes are conducted, most students enjoy conversing in English, even though they may speak English incorrectly. Since the students are unfamiliar with using English, conducting one-by-one English communication sessions could be challenging. To solve this problem, the project divides the classes into small plural groups and arranges communication groups with two or three members on either side (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Group members, students from a Taiwanese school (left) and a Japanese school (right), participated in the SMILE project

Students nowadays are familiar with using IT devices such as smartphones and personal computers. Therefore, if they feel uncomfortable with the conversation, they can employ various other communication methods, such as drawing figures on paper, showing pictures on smartphones, writing text messages, and chatting. The project allows them to use all these forms of interaction because the aim is not to learn English conversation but to get accustomed to cross-cultural communication.

2.1.3 Typical Curriculum and Coordinators

The project offers a typical program template, starting with preparation and ending with a reflection session, and includes at least three international communication classes. From our experience in the three years of operation, we have accumulated some valuable materials, such as students' worksheets, presentation materials, and informed consent forms for collecting data from the participants. Those resources can also be used as educational materials.

The project also provides session coordinators. They help the teachers conduct the lessons thoroughly by facilitating previous and subsequent meetings for the international communication classes, setting proper information on the Dialogbook, and preparing informed consent forms.

2.1.4 Learning Opportunities for Both Students and Teachers

Finally, the essential point of the project is to provide opportunities for students and teachers alike. The project offers practical lessons on how to foster teachers' skills.

2.2 Tools Used in the Project

The online meeting tools and the Dialogbook are critical for conducting cross-cultural education.

2.2.1 Online Meeting Tools

Students should converse using online meeting tools. The project does not specify which online meeting tool should be used because of many conditions and problems in choosing such tools on educational sites. For

example, Taiwan's educational board prohibits using Zoom for security reasons, so the schools interacting with Taiwanese schools should use other software, such as Webex and Google Meet.

Configurations must be considered in addition to tool choice. Japanese public schools tend to restrict the functions of the software they use. Therefore, checking availability is critical before conducting practical classes.

2.2.2 Dialogbook

Contemporary schools use learning management systems (LMS). However, normal LMSs are only available within one school range, meaning that only students, teachers, and staff in the school can access the system. This restriction in using LMSs is an obstacle to the interaction between schools. It is the main reason for developing the Dialogbook for the project.

The Dialogbook has several functions; meeting management is the primary one. Managing connecting information is essential, as is providing accurate information to the students to get into their assigned meeting rooms. This information can be shared between the participants from the Japanese and counterpart schools. Additionally, functions for rubrics management and simple chatting between students and teachers are provided by the Dialogbook.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper presented an overview of the SMILE project and its IT tools. The project aims to provide low-cost intercultural education by connecting schools in Japan and neighboring countries via online conference systems. The information system called Dialogbook was developed to conduct the project efficiently.

In AY 2022, approximately 500 students from 25 institutes participate in the project. We are planning to expand the size of the project larger. If the readers of this paper are interested in it, please feel free to contact us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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