

EDUCACIÓN Y HUMANIDADES COMO EJES DE INVESTIGACIÓN E INNOVACIÓN

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Educación y Humanidades como ejes de investigación e innovación

**Juan Francisco Álvarez-Herrero
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Pompilio Cusano**

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Exploring the Impact of Virtual Cultural Exchanges in Enhancing Cultural Awareness among Japanese Students

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Abstract: In foreign language classes, including English as a Foreign Language courses, integrating cultural themes is essential to expose students to the target language culture. As internationalization becomes the norm, students are encouraged to expand their cultural knowledge beyond their ordinary scope, which is an essential step in understanding and accepting differences worldwide. While educators strive to enhance students' cultural competencies regarding the target culture to prepare them as global citizens, the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence in one's native culture tends to be overlooked. This paper explores how Japanese university students developed their cultural awareness through a virtual cultural exchange with Turkish university students. In this article, detailed planning and execution of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions will be discussed, along with the learning objectives established for students throughout the process. Furthermore, reflections and survey results will be presented to share the insights gained from this project. It is hoped that these findings will enrich the conduct of future virtual cultural exchanges and lay the groundwork for the next phase of my research.

Key words: intercultural communicative competence, native cultural awareness, virtual cultural exchange

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalization has been an increasingly influential force within educational institutions and promoting students towards becoming global citizens. This idea seeks to prepare students not only for academic and professional success but also for active and informed participation in a world that is increasingly interconnected. With technology facilitating easier access to global networks, students can engage with diverse cultures and perspectives right from their classrooms or devices, the role of technology becomes crucial. It serves as a bridge, connecting students across diverse geographies and cultures.

However, for students to effectively participate in this globalized world, they must develop a strong understanding of cultural differences. Cultural competence allows students to navigate international environments with sensitivity and respect. This includes recognizing and appreciating different cultural perspectives, values, and behaviors which are critical for fostering meaningful collaborations and avoiding cultural misunderstandings (Deardorff, 2006). These skills could be developed over time through direct engagement with various cultures, whether through study abroad programs, virtual collaborations, or intercultural communication classes.

Effective communication can be achieved in various ways, and one important approach is when both parties exchange information that the other values (Byram, 1997; 2020). This principle is especially true in intercultural contexts: achieving intercultural competence requires the ability to communicate and behave effectively and

appropriately across different cultural boundaries (Perry & Southwell, 2011). To fully appreciate different cultural perspectives, values, and behaviors, it is crucial to have an equal or greater understanding of your own cultural values and self-identity (Byram, 1997). My own experience as a young Japanese student living abroad illustrates this point. While I was eager to learn a foreign language and assimilate into a new culture, I soon found myself inundated with questions about my own country and culture. Deepening your own cultural understanding is not only about sharing it with people from other cultures but also about broadening your perspective and appreciating aspects of your own culture that you may have overlooked. Thus, enhancing intercultural competence and valuing one's own culture in an English language course became even more meaningful. However, some foreign language educators may not feel fully comfortable with teaching cultural contexts in language classes, and some students may already possess foreign cultural knowledge through digital tools. Therefore, utilizing current technological tools to initiate a virtual cultural exchange with students from another country seems to be a perfect option.

No two virtual exchanges will be the same, and it is therefore impossible to anticipate the communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, and learning opportunities that will occur, because these are largely dependent on students' preexisting language-technocultural competence (O'Dowd et al., 2019, p.166).

This paper explores how Japanese university students developed their cultural awareness through a virtual cultural exchange with Turkish university students. In this article, detailed planning and execution of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions will be discussed, along with the learning objectives established for students throughout the process. Furthermore, reflections and survey results will be presented to share the insights gained from this project. It is hoped that these findings will enrich the conduct of future virtual cultural exchanges and lay the groundwork for the next phase of my research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Incorporating cultural context into language education is not only essential but also an inevitable part of teaching. As scholars, including Kramsch (2011; 2013) and Zhang & Wu (2023), have noted that language and culture are closely intertwined, it becomes a fundamental responsibility for language teachers to provide students with opportunities to engage with different cultural backgrounds. To equip students for navigating dynamic cultural contexts, the development of intercultural competence (IC) is crucial. IC involves three components: attitudes, knowledge, and skills, which foster critical cultural awareness (Deardorff, 2006; 2015). While IC includes valuing other cultures, deepening cultural knowledge, enhancing cultural self-awareness, and effectively processing acquired cultural knowledge, it notably does not specify the language in which communication between parties occurs. Byram (2020, p.5) illuminates this gap by stating, "...important to distinguish between intercultural competence that takes place in 'the same' language and intercultural communicative competence where a 'foreign' language is involved." Byram (1997) further describes intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as the ability to interact effectively and respectfully with individuals from different cultures, accept diverse perspectives and behaviors, and critically perceive both oneself and one's own culture.

The role of native cultural awareness in enhancing ICC has been an area of significant interest as Sercu (2006) highlighted the importance of language teachers assisting

learners in connecting their own culture with foreign cultures, comparing cultural differences, and understanding the perspectives of foreign cultures. In order for students to appreciate various cultures and navigate cultural differences as they perceive them, a foundation of understanding their own culture serves as an indispensable resource. Thus, language educators should help students develop 'cultural antennas (Frank, 2013)' to enhance their self-awareness as cultural beings, critically evaluate various cultures, and recognize the importance of being aware of their own cultural identities. Building on this approach, numerous studies have demonstrated that raising awareness of one's native culture can be effectively achieved in language classes with the help of current technology (Lenkaitis et al., 2019; Wu & Miller, 2019; Zhang & Wu, 2023).

With technological advancement, selecting synchronous and asynchronous communication tools has become effortless. Synchronous settings, as Lenkaitis et al. (2019) and Lewis & O'Dowd (2016) highlight, offer engaging and spontaneous live interaction similar to face-to-face conversations, which heightens motivation and fosters interaction. On the other hand, asynchronous environments, according to Abid & Moalla (2023), benefit learners by providing more time to respond, which allows students to independently enhance their performance and develop strategies for learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving. This approach also reduces students' anxiety about judgment from peers and teachers, eases the pressure to respond quickly, and encourages more open communication (Abid & Moalla, 2023). Additionally, Fabriz (2021) and Lewis & O'Dowd (2016) note that asynchronous settings offer improved opportunities for learners to review and reflect on their interactions afterward, which leads to greater cognitive achievements and more meaningful and thoughtful contributions.

Despite these benefits, each setting also has its own challenges. Although synchronous settings can boost motivation, research has shown that they can also lead to heightened anxiety for some students during online interactions (Fondo, 2020; Martinsen, 2024). Furthermore, research indicates that synchronous communication is less effective for discussing complex ideas or engaging in deep reflection (Fabriz, 2021). On the other hand, delayed feedback in asynchronous settings can result in a loss of student interest and motivation, along with limited chances for social interaction, which may frustrate learners (Abid & Moalla, 2023).

Research has shown that virtual exchange opportunities enhance critical cultural awareness through discussions of cultural contexts during online interactions, particularly when these involve comparisons of different cultures (O'Dowd, 2013). Additionally, O'Dowd (2013) also pointed out that virtual exchange opportunities not only foster learners' linguistic and intercultural skills but also enhance their digital literacy, which is one of the essential 21st-century skills. However, educators need to be aware of several pitfalls when facilitating virtual exchanges. Fernández Gutiérrez et al. (2022) and O'Dowd et al. (2019) observed that participants often lack awareness of effective communication strategies in both synchronous and asynchronous online settings. To address this, it is essential to actively teach and reinforce these communication strategies. Furthermore, there are some researchers who argue that intercultural communication in virtual exchanges often lacks true engagement and is little more than talking to a screen (O'Dowd et al., 2019). Therefore, it is crucial for learners to reflect on what they have learned from their virtual exchanges to ensure these opportunities are meaningful.

3. VIRTUAL CULTURAL PROJECT

3.1. Background

3.1.1. Japanese institution and participants

Twenty first-year students at a public university in Japan participated in a virtual cultural exchange project. This university has a student body of approximately 5000, consisting of five undergraduate schools and six graduate schools. It offers compulsory English courses for students who do not meet the minimum required scores on English proficiency tests, including TOEFL-iBT (61), TOEFL-ITP (500), TOEIC (600), IELTS (5.0), or Eiken (pre-1 level). The compulsory English program is divided into three weekly classes that focus on listening and speaking, reading, and writing skills. Students who achieve the minimum scores on these tests are exempt from taking English courses in the subsequent term. Additionally, students who pass the initial placement test or achieve the required score during the term are eligible to enroll in optional advanced-level courses in the following term. Participants in this project were enrolled in an advanced course that met once a week for three hours over a period of 15 weeks. The language proficiency level of these students was approximately B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

3.1.2. Turkish institution and participants

Across the continent in Turkey, 22 students enrolled in various disciplinary programs at a state university participated in the program. The university, where English is the language of instruction, has approximately 27000 students and includes five undergraduate schools and five graduate schools. To be admitted to undergraduate programs, students must meet minimum scores on English proficiency exams, such as TOEFL-iBT (75), Pearson Test of English Academic (55), or the institution's own English proficiency test. Students who do not meet these scores are required to attend a preparatory program and pass the institution's English proficiency exam. Participants in the exchange project held approximately B2 level fluency in English, as defined by the CEFR.

3.2 Design and delivery of cultural exchange

The project spanned six weeks, incorporating a variety of communication methods: one asynchronous message exchange, three asynchronous video exchanges, and two synchronous video meetings. All participants were organized into eight groups, each consisting of two to three students from different universities.

3.2.1. Week 1: Asynchronous message exchange

During the first week of the project, the asynchronous message exchange was facilitated using Padlet. Participants were required to post self-introduction messages along with associated drawings or pictures on their assigned Padlet boards. Additionally, they were encouraged to engage with their peers by commenting on each other's posts, fostering an interactive learning environment. The Japanese participants, for example, introduced themselves using images of their hometowns, pets, or favorite anime, personalizing and enriching the interactions. This led to lively exchanges, with some group members commenting extensively on posts and inquiring about each other's personal interests. Although this was just the initial phase of the exchange, it was noticeable that some groups were beginning to form meaningful relationships. These early interactions laid the groundwork for what was to blossom into a more extensive project.

3.2.2. Week 2: First asynchronous video exchange

The first asynchronous video exchange took place in the second week, utilizing the video platform Flip. To ensure privacy and security, unique join codes were generated for each Flip group. Furthermore, a moderator approval process was implemented; participants' requests to join a group had to be approved by the instructor, thus adding an additional layer of safety for all involved. Coincidentally, the second week of the project aligned with one of Japan's largest holiday weeks, which influenced the theme chosen for this phase. Participants were instructed to produce a three-minute video presenting recommendations for foreign visitors to their current town or hometown. They were also asked to include suggestions on culturally inappropriate behaviors to avoid, ensuring that the content was both informative and sensitive to cultural nuances. This task was designed to enhance participants' awareness and ability to communicate intercultural insights effectively.

Interestingly, there were noticeable differences in comfort levels between the participants from Japan and Turkey. In the videos, Turkish participants appeared relaxed, with their expressions and postures conveying ease, and their communication style was conversational. In contrast, while the Japanese participants did excellent work and completed the assignment diligently, many seemed nervous and tense. Their videos resembled class presentations, focusing primarily on simply explaining their findings in English. Numerous factors could have contributed to these results, including lack of experience in creating videos in English, confidence in their English skills, or simply insufficient practice time due to the holidays.

3.2.3. Week 3: Second asynchronous video exchange

The second asynchronous video exchange was designed to deepen participants' understanding of their academic environment and foster collaboration with peers. This was especially significant as it was the first semester at the university for the Japanese participants. Participants received detailed instructions on how to convey their messages accurately and clearly to those unfamiliar with the topic. Additionally, the moderators offered a tip which Japanese students might not have considered mentioning in their videos, but foreign students might find intriguing. It was gratifying to see some students incorporate these suggestions, such as filming plastic food models displayed outside the school cafeteria or comparing the campus size to the number of football fields. More importantly, this assignment provided an excellent opportunity for them to work together, which often helped create a more relaxed and positive atmosphere for filming. Collaborative work not only fostered a sense of community among the students but also encouraged the exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives.

3.2.4. Week 4: First synchronous Zoom meeting

Finally, during the fourth week of the project, the first synchronous Zoom meeting was conducted for one hour. The topics selected for this session were the educational system and future career aspirations or goals. These topics were chosen to align with the interests of many Turkish participants who were contemplating careers in education. While the anticipation was high and excitement filled the air during their first synchronous meeting, the Japanese participants encountered several challenges. These challenges could be explained by a study examining factors affecting the willingness to communicate (WTC) in a foreign language: a key concept that explores why individuals are more or less inclined to engage in conversation when using a non-native language (Muroya, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). As Muroya (2022) notes, unfamiliarity with the topic is a significant situational factor in WTC, which may explain some of the first

challenges encountered. The participants seemed to struggle with preparing for the discussion, particularly in forming a clear vision of their career goals, as they had entered university just under two months prior. While they aspired to use their English skills in their future careers, many found it difficult to articulate their career paths and discuss how their education was preparing them for the future. This highlighted how situational factors like topic familiarity could influence communication readiness and effectiveness.

The greatest challenge for most participants was realizing their actual level of language proficiency while communicating in English, a difficulty illustrated by individual WTC factors such as language anxiety and linguistic competencies (Muroya, 2022). As mentioned earlier, all Japanese participants had enrolled in an advanced English level course based on their initial test scores; thus, some may have initially assessed their fluency levels optimistically. Considering that the approved tests for these courses did not necessarily include a speaking component, it led to varied speech fluency among the participants. During their first synchronous meeting, participants likely faced language anxiety that not only undermined their linguistic abilities but also negatively affected their self-confidence and heightened feelings of insecurity. Furthermore, low linguistic competence may have discouraged them from actively communicating with their Turkish peers. Moreover, the synchronous communication required participants to multitask extensively: listening to group members' speeches, comprehending the content, thinking about responses, and creating and uttering English sentences simultaneously (Chou, 2024). This proved to be an overwhelming workload for many of the Japanese participants.

Furthermore, technical glitches, which appear to be common issues in other studies (Abid & Moalla, 2023; Roarty et al., 2023), worsened the difficulties experienced during our session. Even though the moderator had reserved a classroom with a better Wi-Fi connection than a regular classroom, when 20 students connected to the video stream simultaneously, the internet connection slowed, further complicating communication. Additionally, a malfunctioning camera on one participant's computer made it more challenging to communicate effectively. After the synchronous session, it was not difficult to recognize the disappointment and feelings of deficiency among the participants.

3.2.5. Week 5: Third asynchronous video exchange

Another asynchronous video exchange, which featured much deeper cultural topics, was carried out during week five. Three topics were introduced, and the participants were free to choose one to research and create a video for their group members. The first topic involved showcasing a cultural dish, which included the cooking process, explaining its historical or cultural significance, and describing the flavors upon tasting the dish. The second option required participants to address stereotypes or misconceptions commonly held about Japan or Japanese culture. They were tasked not only with researching these stereotypes but also reflecting on their origins and discussing how sharing accurate information could foster greater understanding. The third topic focused on cultural superstitions, where participants were to explore superstitions prevalent in their culture, investigate their historical and cultural backgrounds, and share personal stories and their own perspectives on these beliefs.

Remarkably, the quality and content of these videos clearly demonstrated the participants' dedication to conveying their messages effectively to their foreign friends. Their presentations were not only smooth and confident but also deeply informed by their research into Japanese traditions and personal reflections. Their resilience in not

wanting to disappoint again and their eagerness to ensure their friends appreciated their videos were positively expressed throughout the presentations.

In the end, the week five video exchange assignment likely provided the Japanese students with significant opportunities to deepen their understanding of their native culture. As they prepared their presentations, they needed to contemplate the most effective and logical ways to explain their traditions and beliefs. This process should have not only enhanced their cultural awareness but also improved their ability to communicate complex ideas clearly and persuasively in English. Importantly, the task may have fostered various aspects of communicative competence. It allowed the students to practice their speeches numerous times, adjust their language appropriately for their foreign friends, organize information cohesively, and effectively use aids like visuals and PowerPoint to clarify unfamiliar concepts. Thus, this assignment, by taking advantage of the asynchronous environment, likely enriched their cultural knowledge and strengthened their cross-cultural communication skills.

3.2.6. Week 6: Second synchronous Zoom meeting

The final week of the cultural exchange was conducted via a Zoom meeting, introducing relatively light topics to ease the nervousness of the Japanese participants and foster more relaxed conversations among all attendees. The session covered three topics: 1) Activities and local student hangouts I would share with you if you were an exchange student at my university; 2) Introducing pets or animals in our lives and any symbolic meanings they hold; 3) Teaching three words or phrases from my language and explaining the contexts in which these would be useful. Two different classrooms were arranged to stabilize better Wi-Fi connection, and the duration of this session was extended to 90 minutes, which allowed for more comprehensive discussions on each topic.

Before the upcoming Zoom session, the atmosphere in the classroom among the Japanese participants was both positive and clam, with a clear determination to improve communication and enhance their experience. The participants appeared relaxed and eager to share their preparations with their international friends. Throughout the session, there were no technical issues, and all participants seemed to enjoy communicating with their peers. Previous studies, such as those by Zhang et al. (2024), have noted that communication confidence is the most immediate and powerful learner-internal factor affecting willingness to communicate (WTC). Therefore, it is possible that participants gradually developed higher WTC over the course of the seven-week project. The moderator's role was limited to observing the session, ensuring they did not interfere with the communications between participants.

3.3 Reflection and survey

3.3.1 Reflection paper

Reflection allows students to process their experiences, identify what they have learned, and critically evaluate the effectiveness of their approaches. This process not only deepens learning but also enhances their motivation and engagement with subjects that interest them, thereby enriching their lifelong learning journey. This also relates to the skills needed to understand one component of intercultural competence, which Deardorff (2015, p. 142) describes as 'thinking interculturally.' It was crucial for the Japanese participants to reflect promptly on this project; therefore, an assignment consisting of five topical questions was given immediately after the final synchronous Zoom meeting. Since the project was centered on "cultural exchange" and fostering intercultural communicative competency was one of the primary objectives, questions

directly related to the English language were excluded. The reflection topics included: 1) Self-Discovery and Unexpected Insights; 2) Cultural Reflections; 3) Local Insights; 4) Future Utilization and Long-term Impact; 5) Advice for Future Participants. Each topic was accompanied by a brief prompt to stimulate more in-depth reflection and idea generation.

Some participants focused deeply on one topic while others discussed several topics extensively. Regardless of the attempt to steer participants away from focusing solely on their language competencies, the focal point for a few remained their language proficiency level; however, a majority successfully incorporated both language and cultural observations. Among these language reflections, participants expressed disappointment at their inadequate language proficiency levels and a feeling of defeat, particularly during the initial synchronous meeting. They struggled to maintain smooth conversations due to insufficient English communication skills compounded by poor internet connections. Despite feeling discontented, this challenge encouraged them, and they pledged to perform better in subsequent synchronous meetings, aiming to turn this exchange project into a fun and successful experience. Additionally, there were two notable remarks worth highlighting. One participant praised English as an invaluable tool that allows people from different countries to communicate. She expressed a sense of comfort and self-efficacy in conducting conversations in English with Turkish participants, who were not native speakers of the language. This was because she felt her language errors would be less likely to be judged, enhancing her confidence in her communicative abilities. Another participant stated that she had never studied English with the intention of using it as a means of communication, but rather as one of the subjects for exams. However, the project experience showed her a different use of English, revealing its potential as a practical communication tool.

With regard to cultural observations, some participants found comparisons between Japan and Turkey particularly intriguing and expressed an eagerness to learn more about the similarities and differences in other countries as well. One participant noted, "The most unique part was about misunderstandings or misconceptions that people often have about our country and culture: we do not make *sushi* at home." Moreover, another participant highlighted the gratification derived from others' fondness for Japanese culture, which served to heighten her confidence and encouraged her to deepen her involvement in the Japanese customs she had been practicing. Another participant also mentioned that showing an interest in culture makes people happy on both sides, and this reciprocity enriches the exchange further. Furthermore, more than a few participants pondered their own culture, future goals, and personal identity, guiding them to contemplate what cultural exchange meant to them and how it benefited them. One participant stated that he realized the importance of understanding his own culture thoroughly to achieve successful cross-cultural understanding. Other participants emphasized the value of deepening their understanding of their own culture as essential for personal growth and evolving into global citizens. Additionally, some of them learned that grasping their own customs and culture profoundly aids in identifying who they are, thereby enhancing their sense of self and cultural identity.

3.3.2 *Survey results*

A brief survey was conducted at the conclusion of the exchange project with 18 participants. All survey questions were presented in English; however, participants were given the option to respond to open-ended questions in Japanese. This article will specifically discuss three questions (Table 1) that provide crucial insights into the outcomes of the project.

Table 1. Questions from the Post-Cultural Exchange Survey.

| | Questions |
|---|---|
| 1 | Which activities did you find most enriching during the cultural exchange? Please choose all that apply. – Padlet / Flip / Zoom |
| 2 | How comfortable did you feel interacting with students from the other university during the 1st Zoom meeting? |
| 3 | How comfortable did you feel interacting with students from the other university during the 2nd Zoom meeting? |

The initial question sought to identify effective tools that could deepen the understanding of this cultural exchange. It was notable that two participants chose not to select synchronous meetings, despite the option to choose multiple tools. Upon examining their choices, one participant commented that synchronous meetings did not provide as enriching an experience as asynchronous opportunities did. This participant felt too nervous to communicate online and found it difficult to engage positively which could indicate that a high anxiety level contributed to his unfavorable view of synchronous sessions. It seems a high anxiety level caused him unfavorable feeling towards synchronous sessions. His comment mirrors what Fondo (2020) and Martinsen (2024) discussed about the pitfall of synchronous environments. On the other hand, another participant highlighted that Flip video exchanges enhanced her cultural understanding as the format allowed her to replay the videos multiple times and take her time to write comments. This statement aligns with what other studies mentioned about the advantages of asynchronous sessions (Abid & Moalla, 2023; Chu et al., 2024).

The results from the second and third questions showed positive development. They revealed that 28% of participants felt uncomfortable, 33% felt either very comfortable or comfortable, and 39% indicated a neutral feeling during the first synchronous session. The adverse outcomes were largely due to poor internet connections, which intensified nervousness alongside the realization of their own English proficiency levels. Notably, the improvement in comfort levels during the second session, where 44% expressed feeling very comfortable and 56% felt comfortable, suggests that seeing familiar faces and improved internet connections may have softened the initial discomfort. This change, along with the effort made by participants as mentioned in the reflection papers, might have played a significant role in the positive outcome. Additionally, there were some notable comments that should not be overlooked. Some participants mentioned that they overcame their embarrassment to ask their Turkish friends to repeat themselves, and others noted that the topics assigned for the second session were easier than those for the first. From these comments, two key lessons emerged: 1) the importance of reassuring Japanese participants that it is acceptable not to understand everything on the first attempt, a strategy also emphasized by Roarty et al. (2023) as effective for boosting confidence and clarifying potential misunderstandings; and 2) the significance of selecting topics that could greatly influence participant comfort levels.

4. CONCLUSION

Fostering the internationalization of students seems easier than ever in the era of advanced technology, as synchronous and asynchronous virtual exchanges are just a click away. The seven-week online cultural exchange between Japanese and Turkish university students was conducted to promote their intercultural communicative competence. The project inspired Japanese participants to overcome their inner shyness and build confidence in their abilities to communicate with international peers. With Japanese participants being English learners, the difference in language proficiency

levels was their first obstacle. However, a willingness to do better turned the challenges they initially faced into motivation to enhance their language competencies and overcome their fear of making mistakes. Along with engaging in various cultural topics throughout the seven weeks of the project, some participants recognized their limited understanding of their own culture and emphasized the necessity of native cultural knowledge for achieving effective cross-cultural communication. This project has illustrated the critical role of cultural exchange programs in developing intercultural communicative competence among students. For the next similar project, assessing participants' intercultural communicative competence levels should be evaluated to deepen the meaning of the cultural exchange. Moreover, providing opportunities for students to discuss themes similar to those in the reflection papers with their overseas peers could further enhance intercultural communicative competence. Integrating similar cultural exchange projects into regular academic curricula could greatly enhance students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. It is a wonderful idea for educational systems worldwide to encourage their students to explore and engage with a wide range of cultural perspectives which brings them one step closer to becoming global citizens.

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