# 10 Project Ibunka – a web-based virtual exchange project

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## Abstract

Since 2000, I have been coordinating a web based virtual exchange project, Project Ibunka. Ibunka means different cultures in Japanese. It aims to provide opportunities of authentic interaction among EFL/ESL learners all over the world. The project has been giving English language learners from various countries opportunities to use English for authentic purposes and promote intercultural understanding. Since 2000, more than 6,000 students from 22 countries have joined the project. The long life, the regularly appearing cooperative partner teachers, the diversity of students' cultures, and the high quality of the messages exchanged, are the assets of Project Ibunka. This paper, as a case study of virtual exchange, overviews the background and the project constitution as a whole. It also analyzes the project management and students' written products. The three administrative features, (1) non-unified project goals for partner institutions, (2) selecting and sequencing themes and sub-themes, and (3) moderation by experienced instructors, have contributed to students' quantitative fluency as well as their qualitative improvement.

Keywords: virtual exchange, writing, moderation, bulletin board, theme-setting.

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# 1. Background

The launch of *Project Ibunka* – a web-based, 12 week long, Virtual Exchange (VE) project among English speaking learners from all over the world – dates back to 2000. Thus, the year 2020 marks its 20th anniversary. *Ibunka* means *different cultures* in Japanese. The project has been giving English language learners from various countries opportunities to use English for authentic purposes and promote intercultural understanding. Since 2000, more than 6,000 students from 22 countries have joined the project.

As a Japanese English language teacher, I have been considering how I can make my English essay writing courses more authentic. In Japan, students' essays are addressed mainly for their teachers, not for readers. *Sharing* is the key to changing English writing learning and teaching styles. If students can share their written messages among themselves, they may start to write more for communication. Even before the popularization of the *Internet*, teachers had strived to make sharing of students' writing in their classes. From the late 1990's, online activities began to transform educational sharing fundamentally. It also started to attract many language teachers.

In 1996, I started to use Local Area Network (LAN) connected computer labs to ensure my students could share their work. The system offered two types of folders for sharing: a *course folder* and a *report box*.

For *course folders*, teachers had [+ write + read] permission, whereas students had [- write + read] permission. In such folders, teachers could save/upload and view/download the documents stored. On the other hand, students could only view/download them. Students could not save/upload anything. For *report boxes*, students had [+ write - read] permission, whereas teachers had [- write + read] permission. Students could only save/upload their reports into this folder, but they could not view/download any reports stored there. On the other hand, teachers could view/download the documents, while they could not save/upload anything. When teachers moved/copied students' reports stored in a *report box* into a *course folder*, they could share their classmates' written products.

In 1997, I compiled a Microsoft Windows application that worked on LAN network drives using Microsoft Visual Basic version 4. This application converted students' text strings into HTML documents and connected them by hyperlinks. Since the local network, i.e. the *intranet* confined the sharing, no one could access the messages from outside of the institution. The *Internet* users around the globe could not read them[2].

In 1998, I opened several free email accounts[3] and shared the user-ids and passwords among university students from Japan and Canada. Based on the suggestions by Warschauer (1995), I posted a call for participation message onto *TESL-L*, an international mailing list for language teachers, and I also found my partner institutions. I organized a group discussion among students. Warschauer (1995) suggested, "instead of pairing each student from your class with just one member of another class, pair each person with three to five partners" (p. 49). "The lack of response issues" (Warschauer, 1995, p. 49) that might often occur in paired interaction could be avoided in this type of group discussion. Students were divided into six groups, and each group had both Japanese and Canadian students. One group shared one email account. Members of the same group checked emails sent to this account by their international peers and wrote their replies in emails. Interactions among students were not confined locally anymore. This was my first experience of VE.

In 1999, I coded a Web Bulletin Board (WBB) system using Microsoft Active Server Pages technology, a server-side scripting language. Students from four countries, Uganda, Israel, Germany, and Japan, joined the project. WBB aimed to convert an *intranet*-based LAN application of 1997 into an *Internet*-based one. The discussion was group-based as in the project of 1998.

Although this four-year period, i.e. 1996-1999, was quite short, Internet technology had transformed an institutionally confined intranet-based sharing system into an internationally opened sharing one. However, the organization

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2. Refer to Watanabe (1998) for the details of this intranet application.

3. I used Yahoo! Mail, which started in 1997.

of the project during this period was rather primitive. Although the lack of response issue could be avoided using the group-based discussion, just letting students work on the online bulletin boards meant they only focused on casual chatting, paid little attention to instructor's directions, and did not take up more challenging topics. We needed to incorporate the following three additional features to reform this:

- non-unified project goals for partner institutions;
- selecting and sequencing themes and sub-themes; and
- moderation by experienced instructors.

These features have become key in *Project Ibunka* since then.


## 2. Case study

### 2.1. Participants

Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 show overviews of the participation in past projects. For the last 19 years, students from 22 different countries have joined the project. They are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, China, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Namibia, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Taiwan, the Netherlands, the US, UAE, and the UK. On average, about 350 students from six countries participate in the project every year. Although most of them are university students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), we can also see high school students from both EFL and native English speaking countries. The diversity of students' cultural backgrounds is one of the assets of *Project Ibunka*.

We have a few institutions that join the project almost every year. Students from Indonesia, South Korea, and Taiwan are regular visitors. *Project Ibunka* owes a lot to these regular partner teachers' dedication and enthusiasm. They are another asset of *Project Ibunka* and have contributed to the long life of the project.

Table 1.    Countries

| Years | Countries |
|-------|-----------|
| 2000 | 4: Australia, Germany, UK, and Japan |
| 2001 | 6: China, Germany, Finland, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2002 | 5: Mexico, South Korea, Taiwan, US, and Japan |
| 2003 | 5: China, Burkina Faso, South Korea, Taiwan, US, and Japan |
| 2004 | 7: Burkina Faso, Indonesia, Mexico, Namibia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2005 | 9: Brazil, Burkina Faso, Indonesia, Mexico, Namibia, South Korea, Taiwan, UAE, and Japan |
| 2006 | 9: Burkina Faso, China, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Taiwan, UAE, US, and Japan |
| 2007 | 8: Argentina, Burkina Faso, Indonesia, Namibia, South Korea, Taiwan, US, and Japan |
| 2008 | 8: Burkina Faso, Denmark, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, UAE, US, and Japan |
| 2009 | 7: Burkina Faso, Denmark, Russia, Indonesia, Taiwan, US, and Japan |
| 2010 | 4: Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2011 | 6: Indonesia, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2012 | 7: Denmark, Indonesia, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2013 | 5: Poland, Russia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2014 | 7: Poland, Russia, Indonesia, Italy, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2015 | 4: Indonesia, Italy, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2016 | 8: Brazil, Indonesia, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2017 | 5: China, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Taiwan, and Japan |
| 2018 | 6: Brazil, Germany, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan |

Table 2.    Students and postings

| Years | Participants | Postings |
|-------|--------------|----------|
| 2000 | 109 | 777 |
| 2001 | 240 | 835 |
| 2002 | 252 | 1,317 |
| 2003 | 392 | 1,405 |
| 2004 | 344 | 1,582 |
| 2005 | 386 | 1,778 |
| 2006 | 301 | 1,367 |
| 2007 | 459 | 2,100 |
| 2008 | 730 | 3,662 |
| 2009 | 1,058 | 5,073 |

| 2010 | 242 | 1,272 |
|------|-----|-------|
| 2011 | 367 | 1,958 |
| 2012 | 255 | 1,651 |
| 2013 | 140 | 906 |
| 2014 | 377 | 1,970 |
| 2015 | 229 | 1,200 |
| 2016 | 275 | 1,333 |
| 2017 | 268 | 1,042 |
| 2018 | 204 | 1,283 |
| **Total** | **6,628** | **32,511** |

Table 3.    Frequency distribution of partner countries

| **Countries** | **Times of participation** |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| Argentina | 1 |
| Australia | 1 |
| Brazil | 3 |
| Burkina Faso | 7 |
| China | 4 |
| Denmark | 3 |
| Finland | 1 |
| Germany | 3 |
| Indonesia | 15 |
| Italy | 3 |
| Japan | 19 |
| Kazakhstan | 1 |
| Mexico | 3 |
| Namibia | 3 |
| Poland | 5 |
| Russia | 5 |
| South Korea | 14 |
| Taiwan | 18 |
| the Netherlands | 2 |
| US | 6 |
| UAE | 3 |
| UK | 1 |

The students' levels of English are from intermediate to higher intermediate, more specifically, Common European Framework of Reference for languages

(CEFR) A2-B2 levels. As we will see later, we provide the following three discussion themes, (1) *school life*, (2) *cultures*, and (3) *social issues/world peace*. Table 4 shows approximate correspondence between these themes and CEFR scales.

Table 4. Discussion themes and CEFR scales (Council of Europe, 2019)

| Discussion themes | CEFR Scales |
|---|---|
| School life | |
| Cultures | A2 |
| Social issues/world peace | B1 B2 |

## 2.2.    Project description

### 2.2.1.    An overview

Every year, *Project Ibunka* starts by sending out a Project Ibunka Call For Participation message (*Ibunka* CFP, see supplementary material, Appendix A) to several mailing lists and sites for educational collaboration. This document details the (1) project outline, (2) schedule, and (3) student registration directions.

Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 show the primary interfaces of the current version of WBB. Users see Figure 1 when they are authenticated. This page is a portal to several discussion boards. Figure 2 appears when they choose a discussion board. When they post a comment[4] to a previously posted message, it is shown with some indentation. They can see the relationship between messages posted onto the board. When they click on one of the subject lines, as shown in Figure 2, a message view page (Figure 3) appears.

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4. Here, a comment means both an additional suggestion, opinion, remark, response, etc. given by a user AND a reply, answer, etc. to an inquiry from others. It should be referred to as a comment/reply.

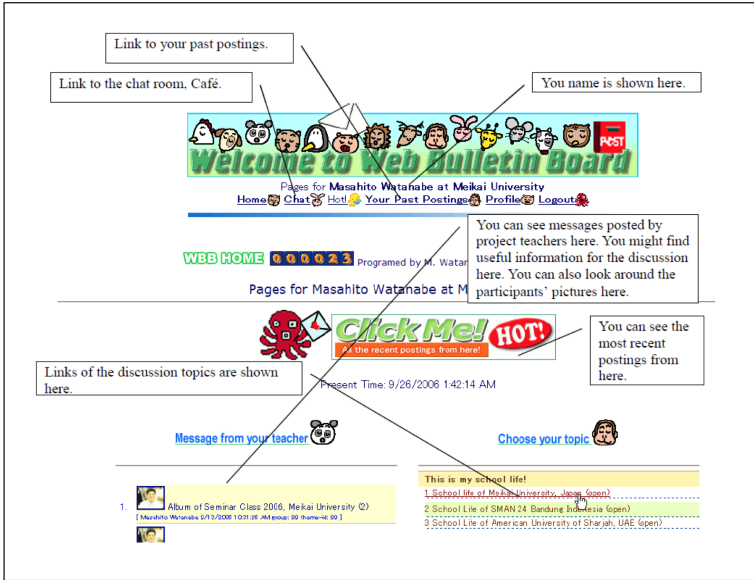Figure 1. Welcome page and theme selection



Figure 2. Message tree view

Figure 3. Message view



A few new tools have been added for teachers to retrieve students' postings on WBB since 2000. However, the fundamental phases for the interaction stated in *Ibunka* CFP and project moderation have almost been the same for the last 19 years.

### 2.2.2.   Features

The following three sub-sections explain the three unique features of Project Ibunka: (1) non-unified project goals for partner institutions; (2) selecting and sequencing themes and sub-themes; and (3) moderation by experienced instructors.

*Non-unified project goals for partner institutions*

Although I started the project with the goal of improving students' English writing, this is not the sole goal of the project. Every institution can set up its own goals. Most of the partner teachers evaluate students based on their contributions to the project activities. However, this is not required at all. In fact, some teachers use Project Ibunka for self-learning opportunities for their students, and do not use students' contributions for course evaluation. Students also can post almost any messages they like irrespective of regulatory standards listed in the Project Ibunka CFP message. Both teachers and students can enjoy considerable leeway in the project. Figure 4 displays this graphically (Watanabe, 2006).

Figure  4.   Goals of Project Ibunka
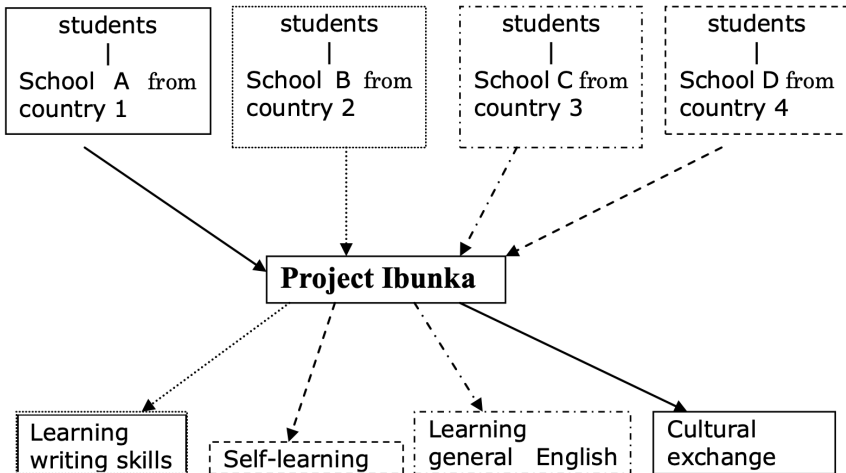
Compare Figure 4 to Figure 5, which depicts online team-teaching projects. In team-teaching, not only students but also teachers collaborate for a few unified goals of the project. Teachers are responsible for the development of students from other institutions too.

Figure 5. Goals of online team-teaching[5]
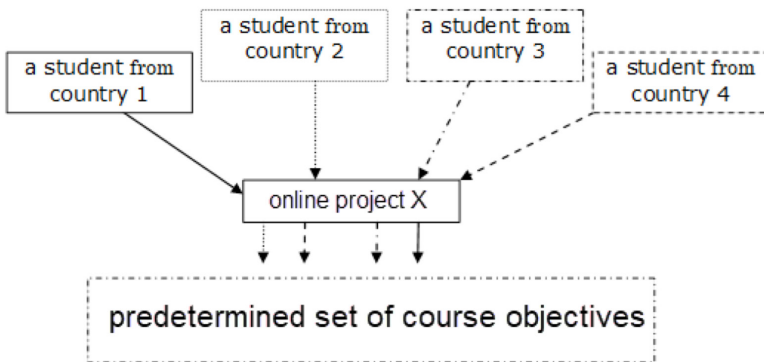


Project Ibunka does not specify any common educational goals for partner schools. Instead, it provides only the opportunities for VE among students. Thus, partner teachers should carefully design their courses so that students might achieve desirable outcomes through participation in the project. However, they do not have any responsibility for the goals set up by other partner teachers. It guarantees educational flexibility for teachers. They do not have to negotiate among partner teachers about the core concepts of the project, nor do they have to make any fundamental revisions in their course syllabus. This also has contributed to facilitating project participation.

*Selecting and sequencing themes and sub-themes*

As is stated in the Project Ibunka CFP message, the project has three themes for discussion, i.e. (1) *school life*, (2) *cultures*, and (3) *social issues/world peace*.

5. The original idea of this figure comes from Watanabe (2006, p. 36).

They are sequentially arranged, and each lasts for four weeks. These themes are roughly in line with CEFR scales (see Table 4). Students start from the topics of so-called, *big C* cultures and move to *little c* cultures (Erasmus+, 2017). *School life* requires students to write a message with 200 or more words; *cultures*, 300 or more; and *social issues/world peace*, 400 or more. Students have to write longer and more challenging essays as the themes proceed. Thus, the themes are arranged by the degree of language and cognitive skills required.

Each theme has several sub-themes. As for the theme, *School life*, a series of sub-themes, such as (1) *School Life of [...] - Indonesia*, (2) *School Life of [...] - Indonesia*, (3) *School Life of [...] - Indonesia*, (4) *School Life of [...] - Taiwan*, and the others are listed in Figure 6 (institution names are masked).

Figure 6.  School life sub-themes



For this theme, *School life*, students play two roles: a *host* and a *guest*. First, host students (i.e. students from the same institution) post messages about their school life onto the board with their institution name. Then, when guest students (i.e. students from different institutions) make a comment or an inquiry to the hosts, the host students then reply to them. This is a type of group discussion and promotes ice-breaking among partner students.

The themes, *cultures,* and *social issues/world peace* are not group-oriented. They are open to all participants. They each have the following sub-themes.

Events and places of interest
- Festivals in My Country/Town/School
- Annual/Seasonal Events of My Country/Town/School
- Tourist Spots and Theme Parks of My Country/Town
- Christmas of My Country/Town/School
- Birthday Party
- Dating and St. Valentine's Day

Food
- Fast Food, Snacks, and Sweets of My Country/Town
- Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner of My Country/Town/School

Entertainment
- My Favorite TV Programs, Films, Animations, and Comics
- My Favorite Music
- My Favorite Sports Activities
- My Favorite Fashion
- My Favorite Novels/Literary Works
- My Extracurricular/Club/Volunteer Activities
- Internet and Mobile Phone Uses
- 56 Traditional Arts of My Country/Town

Family
- How Parents Raise their Children in My Country
- Young People of My Country/Town
- The Aged of My Country/Town

Education
- Elementary School Education
- High School Education
- University Education

- This is How I have Learned English
- Students' Job Hunting

Humanistic Activities
- This is What I Believe and Think, My Religion and Philosophy
- This is my Language
- Other Topics

Social issues/world peace
- Wars and Conflicts
- Crime
- Educational Issues
- Family and Human Issues
- Economic and Political Issues
- Health and Disease
- Environmental Issues
- Other topics

The diversity of the sub-themes, especially that of *cultures*, is to ensure learner-centered voluntary participation in the project. All students are free to follow any topics they like, and they do not have to take the topics a teacher or a group had determined in advance. Compared to the *cultures* theme, the *social issues/ world peace* theme has less sub-themes. The sub-themes are broader in nature. This topic brings students with similar interests together, and facilitates more concentrated and critical discussion.

*Moderation by experienced instructors*

Intercultural exchanges, especially when they are organized online as a VE, require an experienced *moderator*, whose role Carlson (1989) defined as follows:

> "[moderators] help people get started, give them feedback, summarize, weave the contributions of different folks together, get it unstuck when necessary, deal with individuals who are disruptive, or get off the track,

bring in new material to freshen it up periodically, and get feedback from the group on how things are going and what might happen from the group on how things are going and what might happen next… [Further, the facilitator needs to] communicate with the group as a whole, sub-groups, and individuals to encourage participation" (pp. 6.11).

Teachers' moderation is significant in *Project Ibunka*. Teachers have to give students various types of information, reply promptly to the inquiries posted, achieve a sense of unity, reduce the risk associated with VE, and guide them to better learning cooperation. The weekly-published project newsletters mainly undertake the role of this. They are published 12 times by the end of the project. They provide information about (1) current tasks for students, (2) the operational procedures of WBB, (3) the partner schools, students and teachers, (4) the compositional skills, (5) common online asynchronous communication skills, (6) several excellent postings of the week, (7) a few reading materials for critical thinking, and others (see supplementary material, Appendix B).

Recognition of outstanding contributors to the project is another valuable means of moderation. WBB has a unique system of classifying and counting students' postings. Every student has an area, *Your Past Posting* (see Figure 7), where all the postings that have some relevance to him/her are listed. On this page, those postings that the student himself/herself wrote are shown without any indentation. They are called *outbound messages*, meaning that the message has gone from him/her to other participants. On the other hand, if their messages can get comments from others, those incoming messages are shown with some indentation. They are called *inbound messages*, meaning they have come from others and arrived to him/her.

At the end of the *Your Past Posting* page, you can find a table that shows the number of both outbound and inbound messages for each of the three themes. *Points* at the right end of the table shows the total number of both outbound and inbound messages. This number, called *the contribution point*, can be taken as a measure of a student's effort in the project. Every year, on the sixth and twelfth issues of the newsletter, the following contributor ranking is published (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Your Past Postings page



Figure 8. Contributor ranking (Project Ibunka2018, Newsletter No 12, p. 5)

The ranking acknowledges students' efforts in the project and gives them motivation for further work. Note that to get higher points, students should post their messages considering their readers as much as possible. Otherwise, their postings cannot induce readers to make their comments. *The contributor points* offered in *Project Ibunka* promote writing for communication.

Two types of certificates can be attained after the project is completed. They are given to students who have fulfilled the following requirements for a Level 2 participation certificate:

- have written at least one post for each of the three themes, i.e. (1) *school life*, (2) *cultures*, and (3) *social issues/world peace*. Each contained at least 200, 300 and 400 words, respectively; and

- have made at least three comments to the postings of other partner students for each of the three themes. Each of the participants' comments contained at least 100 words.

They are also given to students for a Level 1 participation certificate, in addition to the two requirements for Level 2 participation, one should at least recieve two comments from other partner students for each of the three themes.

In my writing courses, the fulfillment of Level 2 participation is one of the requirements of the course. If students do not achieve this level, they will fail. The level ensures students at least 12 points in total[6]. Points over 12 are, of course, evaluated. In order to achieve better marks, they have to work on both outbound and inbound messages. This evaluation policy copes with  the lack of purpose, one of the two issues[7] that occurred in online pen-pal exchanges, as identified by Warschauer (1995, p. 49). Writing by computer to people in other parts of the world can be a very exciting experience, especially in the beginning, but for many students, the initial excitement can wear off. Experience

6. 12=4x3, i.e. four outbound points for each of the three themes.

7. The first issue pointed out in Warschauer (1995, p. 49) is lack of response. This often occurs in one-to-one exchange of pen-pal. However, it rarely occurs in one-to-many exchange of online bulletin-board.

has proven that international email exchanges can become lackluster if they are not somehow integrated into the curriculum of the course.

## 2.3.    Data collection and analysis

In this paper, a quantitative analysis is conducted with all data collected from *Project Ibunka 2018*. The research data mainly come from two database tables: *user profile* and *forum*. A *user profile* table is created by a database administrator and stores information relevant to all of the users, such as user-ids, passwords, personal names, schools, and others. It is not accessible by standard users. It gives us an overview of registered users' participation. A *forum* table stores information relevant to all the messages posted by users, such as posters' user-ids, message subject lines, message bodies, posting times, theme-ids, and others. A record of every user's access to this table is created once a user posts his/her message to the online forms. It provides an overview of the nature of interactions among users.

I set up two essential features in the analysis of students' interactions, i.e. *thread-initiating* and *influential*. If a message posted is not a response to any previous messages, it is [+ thread-initiating], meaning the message starts a discussion anew. If it is a response to a message posted, it is [- thread-initiating], meaning the message is a comment to a previously posted one and does not start a new thread. If a message induces other students to post a comment to it, it is [+ influential], meaning it influences readers. If not, it is [- influential], meaning it does not invite others to comment.

With these two features, postings are classified into four types. In Type 1 postings, [+ thread-initiating] and [+ influential], the author started a new topic, and other students made one or more comments. In Type 2 postings, [- thread-initiating] and [+ influential], the author commented on a message previously posted, and this comment inspired others to reply. In Type 3 postings, [- thread-initiating] and [- influential], the author made a comment, but it was not commented on by anyone. In Type 4 postings, [+ thread-initiating] and [- influential], the author started a new topic, but no one commented. Table 5 summarizes this.

Table 5.  Four types of interaction

|  | Thread-initiating | Influential |
|---|---|---|
| Type 1 | + | + |
| Type 2 | - | + |
| Type 3 | - | - |
| Type 4 | + | - |

## 3.  Results

Of the 204 participants of *Project Ibunka 2018*, 12 are teachers and 192 are students. The number of postings by each student varies significantly from 0, minimum, to 66, maximum. The following is a frequency distribution table of students' postings. Table 6 shows the number of postings (bins), the number of students (frequency), the Cumulative Frequency (CF), and the Cumulative Frequency Ratio (CFR), followed with a histogram, as in Figure 9.

Table 6.  Frequency distribution of students' postings

| Postings (Bins) | Students (Frequency) | CF | CFR |
|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 32 | 32 | 16.7% |
| 1-2 | 49 | 81 | 42.2% |
| 3-4 | 17 | 98 | 51.0% |
| 5-6 | 17 | 115 | 59.9% |
| 7-8 | 17 | 132 | 68.8% |
| 9-10 | 17 | 149 | 77.6% |
| 11-12 | 11 | 160 | 83.3% |
| 13-14 | 9 | 169 | 88.0% |
| 15-16 | 8 | 177 | 92.2% |
| 17-18 | 3 | 180 | 93.8% |
| 19-20 | 3 | 183 | 95.3% |
| 21-22 | 1 | 184 | 95.8% |
| 22-24 | 4 | 188 | 97.9% |
| 25-26 | 0 | 188 | 97.9% |
| 27-28 | 1 | 189 | 98.4% |
| 29-30 | 0 | 189 | 98.4% |
| 31-32 | 1 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 33-34 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |

| 35-36 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 37-38 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 39-40 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 41-42 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 43-44 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 45-46 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 47-48 | 0 | 190 | 99.0% |
| 49-50 | 1 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 51-52 | 0 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 53-54 | 0 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 55-56 | 0 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 57-58 | 0 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 59-60 | 0 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 61-62 | 0 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 63-64 | 0 | 191 | 99.5% |
| 65-66 | 1 | 192 | 100.0% |
| **Total** | **192** | | |

Figure 9. Histogram of students' postings
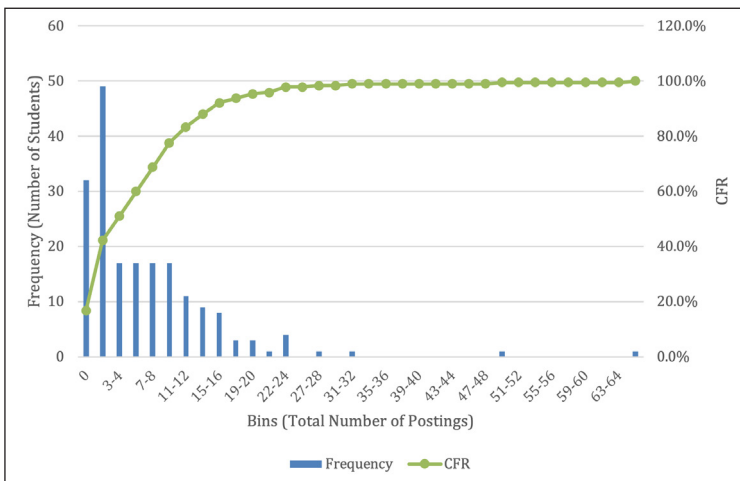


Table 8 shows, of all the students, 42.2% posted less than three messages during the project period. Considering 6.65, the average number of postings, the overall shape of the Figure 9 bar chart is far from that of a normal distribution.

The following table shows the frequency distribution of the different themes. Students' theme selection patterns are classified into eight types, i – viii in Table 7. On this table, note Type i students, who did not participate in any themes at all, amount to 16.7%. We have three types for those who took only one theme, Type ii, iii, and iv. Among these three, Type ii (18.8%), who only took Theme 1 and finished, outnumbers the other two. Thus, coupled with Type i, 35.5%[8] finished participation by the end of Theme 1.

Similarly, of the three two-theme-taking types, Type v (21.9%), who took Theme 1 and 2 and finished, outnumbers the other two, Type vi and vii. Again, coupled with Type i and ii, 57.4%[9] ended by the end of Theme 2. Of all the students, 41.7% participated in all three themes. It means that 58.3% did not participate in all three themes. In short, nearly 60% of participants did not complete all three themes.

Table 7.   Frequency distribution of themes taken by students

| Themes taken | Type | Theme 1 | Theme 2 | Theme 3 | Students | Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | i | NA | NA | NA | 32 | 16.7% |
| | ii | √ | NA | NA | 36 | 18.8% |
| 1 | iii | NA | √ | NA | 1 | 0.5% |
| | iv | NA | NA | √ | 0 | 0.0% |
| | v | √ | √ | NA | 42 | 21.9% |
| 2 | vi | NA | √ | √ | 1 | 0.5% |
| | vii | √ | NA | √ | 0 | 0.0% |
| 3 | viii | √ | √ | √ | 80 | 41.7% |
| | | | | Total | 192 | 100.0% |

Table 8 below shows the number of students classified by their countries, schools, and classes. It also shows the number of students who posted less than three messages and the ratio by country, school, and class.

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8. Type i (16.7%) and Type ii (18.8%) make 35.5%.

9. Type i (16.7%), Type ii (18.8%), and Type v (21.9%) make 57.4%.

Table 8.   Frequency distribution of the students who posted less than three
         messages

| Countries/schools/classes | Students | Less than 3 | Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Brazil** | **10** | **9** | **90.0%** |
| A University - Brazil | 10 | 9 | 90.0% |
| **Germany** | **16** | **0** | **0.0%** |
| B University - Germany | 16 | 0 | 0.0% |
| **Indonesia** | **65** | **40** | **61.5%** |
| C High School - Indonesia | 10 | 4 | 40.0% |
| D High School - Indonesia | 10 | 9 | 90.0% |
| E University - Indonesia | 45 | 7 | 15.6% |
| Class E-1, E University - Indonesia | 23 | 3 | 13.0% |
| Class E-2, E University - Indonesia | 22 | 4 | 18.2% |
| **Japan** | **23** | **2** | **8.7%** |
| Yokohama National University - Japan | 23 | 2 | 8.7% |
| **South Korea** | **12** | **6** | **50.0%** |
| F University - South Korea | 12 | 6 | 50.0% |
| **Taiwan** | **66** | **44** | **66.7%** |
| G University - Taiwan | 66 | 44 | 66.7% |
| Class G-1, G University - Taiwan | 26 | 15 | 57.7% |
| Class G-2, G University - Taiwan | 40 | 29 | 72.5% |
| **Total** | **192** | **81** | **42.2%** |

In some of the institutions, only a few participated in the project. For these institutions, participation was rather voluntary. It did not constitute a required factor for course evaluation. On the other hand, some institutions regarded it as a crucial requirement for the course. Their participation rate was quite high.

These tables confirm the fact that *Project Ibunka* does not have any rigid educational goals, as we saw above. Every partner teacher is free to decide how he/she can use *Project Ibunka* for his/her course and set up his/her course objectives.

However, the low student participation rate does not undermine the value of the project. Compare Table 8 to Table 9, which shows the number of students'

postings classified by students' countries, schools, and classes, and the ratio to all postings, i.e. 1,283. Table 8 shows 61.5% of Indonesian students posted less than three messages. On the other hand, Table 9 shows their contribution amounts to 44.0% of all of the messages posted:

Table 9.  Frequency distribution of students' postings by countries, schools, and classes

| Countries/schools/classes | Postings | Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| **Brazil** | **17** | **1.3%** |
| A University - Brazil | 17 | 1.3% |
| **Germany** | **287** | **22.4%** |
| B University - Germany | 287 | 22.4% |
| **Indonesia** | **565** | **44.0%** |
| C High School - Indonesia | 39 | 3.0% |
| D High School - Indonesia | 14 | 1.1% |
| E University - Indonesia | 512 | 39.9% |
| Class E-1, E University - Indonesia | 217 | 16.9% |
| Class E-2, E University - Indonesia | 295 | 23.0% |
| **Japan** | **190** | **14.8%** |
| Yokohama National University - Japan | 190 | 14.8% |
| **South Korea** | **47** | **3.7%** |
| F University - South Korea | 47 | 3.7% |
| **Taiwan** | **177** | **13.8%** |
| G University - Taiwan | 177 | 13.8% |
| Class G-1, G University - Taiwan | 78 | 6.1% |
| Class G-2, G University - Taiwan | 99 | 7.7% |
| **Total** | **1,283** | **100.0%** |

Thus, students' motives for the project can differ significantly even among the students of the same institution.

Table 10 Shows the type of interaction[10], their frequencies, and the average number of words contained in the messages.

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10. Refer to Table 5 for the details of interaction types.

Table 10. Frequency distribution of students' postings by types of interactions

| Interactions | Postings | Ratio | Average words |
|---|---|---|---|
| Type 1 | 302 | 23.5% | 322.1 |
| Type 2 | 231 | 18.0% | 156.6 |
| Type 3 | 641 | 50.0% | 153.3 |
| Type 4 | 109 | 8.5% | 341.1 |
| **Total** | **1,283** | **100.0%** | **209.6** |

Since Types 1 to 3 are somehow connected with messages posted by other participants, 91.5 %[11] of all messages are *interactive*, meaning they have achieved communication. This reflects message sharing on the WBB. Writing courses hosted in traditional classrooms where sharing is problematic cannot achieve such interactions.

The numbers listed under the row of *average words* differ among types. Types 1 and 4 messages are both [+ thread-initiating]. They are posted to start a new discussion. The values, 322.1 (Type 1) and 344.1 (Type 4), are double the value of 155.6 (Type 2) and 153.3 (Type 3), which are both [- thread-initiating] and posted to comment on an existing message. It is a natural move in communication since we need more explanation about a topic when we start a discussion anew than when we comment.

Table 11 explores students' interactions in more detail than Table 10. It shows the number of postings in each of the three themes and the interaction types. It also shows the corresponding average number of words. Here, it is important to see the values of the same interaction types differ across the three themes (see also Figure 10 and Figure 11). It gives you an idea of how the nature of interaction differs depending on the themes. For example, compare (1) Type 1, *school life* values, i.e. 22.0% (ratio) and 271.6 (average words), (2) Type 1, *cultures* values, i.e. 22.6% (ratio) and 313.4 (average words), and (3) Type 1, *social issues/world peace* values, i.e. 29.7% (ratio) and 433.6 (average words).

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11. Type 1 (23.5%), Type 2 (18.0%), and Type 3 (50.8%) make 91.5%.

The values with two asterisks (**) show the largest one, while those with one asterisk (*) show the least one, among the interactions of the same type[12]. The following graphs visualize this table.

Table 11. Frequency distribution of students' postings by themes and types of interactions

| Themes/interactions | Postings | Ratio | Average words |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. School life** | **563** | **100.0%** | **176.6** |
| Type 1 | 124 | 22.0%* | 271.6* |
| Type 2 | 123 | 21.8%** | 144.6* |
| Type 3 | 279 | 49.6% | 138.7* |
| Type 4 | 37 | 6.6%* | 249.8* |
| **2. Cultures** | **501** | **100.0%** | **210.3** |
| Type 1 | 113 | 22.6% | 313.4 |
| Type 2 | 90 | 18.0% | 165.3 |
| Type 3 | 247 | 49.3% | 154.4 |
| Type 4 | 51 | 10.2%** | 332.3 |
| **3. Social issues/world peace** | **219** | **100.0%** | **292.8** |
| Type 1 | 65 | 29.7%** | 433.6** |
| Type 2 | 18 | 8.2%* | 195.4** |
| Type 3 | 115 | 52.5%** | 186.4** |
| Type 4 | 21 | 9.6% | 523.3** |
| **Total** | **1,283** | | **209.6** |

In Theme 1, *school life*, Type 4 interactions ([+ thread-initiating, - influential]), where messages are left uncommented, shows the least ratio, 6.6%. It means as many as 93.4% postings are *interactive*. Type 2 interactions ([- thread-initiating, + influential]), where one participant's comment to the previous message induces others to reply, shows the largest, 21.8%. Even the comments addressed to others are commented in return with high probability. A friendly and casual atmosphere is rich on Theme 1 boards.

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12. For example, (1) the ratio of Type 1 interaction of Theme 1, 22.0%, with one asterisk, is less than the other two Type 1 ratios, 22.6% (Type 1, Theme 2) and 29.7% (Type 1, Theme 3), and (2) The average words of Type 4, Theme 3, 523.3, with two asterisks, outnumbers both that of Type 4, Theme 1, 249.8 and that of Type 4, Theme 2, 332.3.

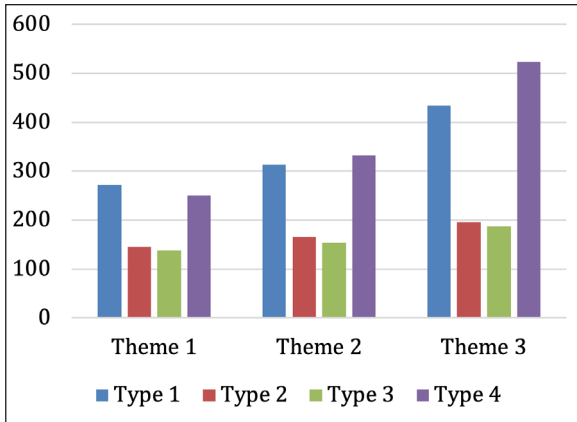Figure 10. The ratio of discussion types by themes and types
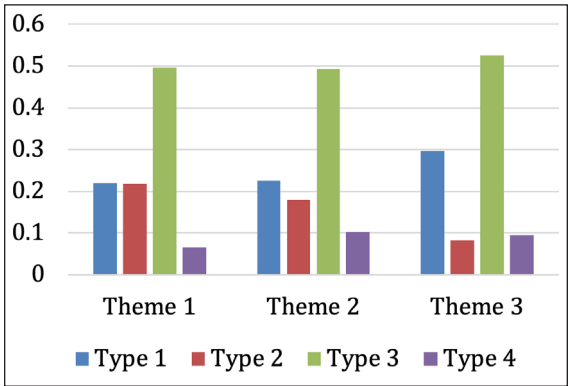


Figure 11. The average number of words by themes and types



On the other hand, in Theme 3, *social issues/world peace*, first note that values listed under the row of *average words* are all given with two asterisks, i.e. the largest ones. Even in [- thread-initiating] Type 2 and Type 3 interactions, students write more words than in other themes. It is generally the case that the more challenging topics become, the more words we should write to conclude. The ratio of Type 3, 52.5%, is the largest. Since Type 3 is [- thread-initiating, - influential], the challenging topics posed might be too formal to attract

comments. We can also infer that students might have lost their enthusiasm for writing in this theme since they had already written a great deal before they started Theme 3.

The largest number might reflect the fact that students are asked to write more words in Theme 3 at the beginning of the project. However, they are completely free to write and post any messages in this theme. Partner teachers rarely prevent their students from posting when their essays do not contain the number of words required. In fact, *Ibunka* CFP stipulates 100 words or more for a comment to a previously posted message irrespective of the three themes. However, non-thread initiating postings, i.e. Type 2 and Type 3 messages, gradually increase the word count as the themes proceed.

Between Themes 1 and 3, Theme 2, *cultures*, shows some intermediate characteristics on interactions. Except for the ratio of Type 4, 10.2%, all the values of ratio and average words are given without any asterisks. They come between light and feasible Theme 1, and formal and challenging Theme 3. The largest ratio of Type 4 might arise from the fact that we offer as many as 27 discussion boards for this theme, and some messages are more likely to be unattended.

We can conclude from the analysis above that each of the three themes maintains distinct aspects of interaction, and they are arranged on a scale of learner manageability. If students can go through three themes, they can start from light chatting and gradually end in a formal intercultural discussion.

## 4.    Pedagogical principles

*Project Ibunka* started with the aim of making English writing activities more communicative through the Internet in 2000. Seppo Tella (1991, 1992a, 1992b) of the University of Helsinki, who organized a series of studies on educational aspects of international Information and Communication Technology (ICT) exchange, pointed out the following three benefits of ICT writing, saying it:

- gives a more learner-centered working environment; students can choose their themes and topics for writing;

- brings quantitative change in writing; students enjoy the intercultural communication and write more than in regular classes; and

- brings qualitative change in writing; to get comments from partners, students have to respect the flow of on-going discussion and often have to adjust the content to make it suitable for their readers.

Although it depends heavily on the nature of each student, if he/she is well-motivated, the three benefits have been realized in *Project Ibunka*. It provides students with many choices of theme and sub-theme. We can find students who post a lot of messages moved by their own will to respond. Students who go through the three themes gradually increase the average number of words contained in a message as stated in the *Ibunka* CFP. They change their writing styles depending on the themes and the interaction types.

## 5.    Conclusion

It is true that more detailed qualitative analysis of changes in students' intercultural awareness is required. However, we can say that Project Ibunka offers many opportunities to experience cultural differences. For example, compared to many partner students in other countries, Japanese students do not have many opportunities to use English for communication in the classroom and on campus as well as in their daily life after school. Their English is accurate but lacks fluency. As we see from Figure 8, *contributor ranking* of partner students, no Japanese students rank in the top 20. However, when a Japanese student posts a message about his/her school life, a few Indonesian students more than likely write comments to him/her. It gives them the confidence that their English is sufficient to communicate with English learners from foreign countries. During the phase of the Theme 3 discussion, we can

find articles about religions in Germany, Taiwanese music, a finger cutting tradition in Indonesia, the Chuseok festival of South Korea, Independence Day celebrations in Indonesia, *Eragon*, a fantasy story by C. Paolini, family life in Germany, a traditional torch parade in Cianjur, a city in West Java, a sweet 17 birthday party in Indonesia, *How to Get Away with Murder*, an American TV drama, and several others. These topics cannot be bypassed without stimulating students' intellectual curiosity.

In this article we saw the three core administrative features of *Project Ibunka*, which are repeated below:

- non-unified project goals for partner institutions;

- selecting and sequencing themes and sub-themes; and

- moderation by experienced instructors.

Due to these VE features, and in addition to the three benefits of ICT writing courses outlined above, *Project Ibunka* also provides three major educational benefits:

- experiencing cultural diversity by reading messages of foreign students;

- learning intercultural strategies and skills by interacting among participants with different cultural backgrounds; and

- improving gradually their quality of writing by undertaking tasks that become more challenging in the course of the project.

Although the low participation rate of partner students might be considered an issue of the project, if teachers and students are well-motivated to participate in the three themes of the project, they are sure to achieve the desirable educational goals that each partner school would have.

## 6.     Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/1jjczwki7mibh2ah1fhd1mb62s045ecy

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