

A Research Report on Promoting Intercultural Communication through an Online Communication App

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Abstract

This study assesses the effectiveness of a 10-week project in promoting communication using media and multimodal interaction strategies in Telegram groups among 87 students from seven countries. In the project, students were placed in small groups with a leader in each group and the group members were swapped between groups every block, which consisted of 3 weeks. In each block, participants were expected to upload a video based on given topics the first two weeks and plan for a synchronous online meetup in the third week. After 3 blocks, in the tenth week, a super online meetup was organized for all participants and teachers. A questionnaire was administered at the end to obtain feedback from participants. Correlations between the types of media used and word count were analyzed. It was found that a rather strong correlation was established between the two entities; however, the causal effect remained inconclusive as there were probably other factors that contributed to the level of engagement that needed further investigation.

要旨

本研究では、7カ国から集まった87名の学生を対象に、Telegramグループにおけるメディアとマルチモーダルなインタラクション戦略を用いたコミュニケーション促進のための10週間のプロジェクトの効果を評価しました。プロジェクトでは、学生は各グループにリーダーがいる小グループに分けられ、3週間で構成されるブロックごとにグループのメンバーが入れ替わりました。各ブロックの参加者は、最初の2週間で与えられたトピックに基づいてビデオをアップロードし、3週目にはオンラインでの同期ミーティングを計画することになっていました。3ブロック終了後の10週目には、参加者全員と先生を対象としたスーパーオンラインミーティングが開催されました。最後にアンケートを実施し、プロジェクトの構成を改善するための提案を参加者から引き出しました。また、使用したメディアの種類と単語数の相関関係を分析しました。その結果、2つの団体の間にはかなり強い相関関係があることがわかりましたが、エンゲージメントのレベルに貢献した他の要因があるかもしれないので、因果関係は決定的ではありませんでした。

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Our increasing dependence on the use of various technological tools has impacted every facet of our lives, and social media technology has opened new horizons of developing and learning new information, sharing ideas and connecting with others. Smartphone ownership has become a nearly ubiquitous element of modern life. Consider the role of social media in the humdrum routine of waiting for the train or bus. At train stations or bus stops, it is no longer an uncommon sight to see people have their gaze glued to their mobile devices, scrolling and tapping and smiling to themselves. They may make plans for the weekends with their classmates on messaging apps, like WhatsApp, LINE or KakaoTalk. Others may take pictures of interesting sights and instantly share them through their Instagram Stories, double tap the screen to “like” their friends’ posts of their mundane lunch or write birthday greetings on Facebook to a distant aunt, while continuing to wait. The above example shows how digital technologies play an increasingly crucial role in society and how social media is very much integrated into our social practices. This project utilizes such social practices and the instant virtual connectedness of individuals to promote intercultural communication between students from different parts of the world through the use of Telegram, a popular messaging app.

Background

The current travel restrictions imposed by many countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic has deprived many students of the opportunities to experience intercultural communication through study abroad exchange programs. A 10-week project was designed and implemented that brought 87 university students of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds together through an online semi-synchronous exchange. Participating countries included Japan, Israel, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, South Korea, Taiwan and Turkey. The objectives of this project were to deepen intercultural understanding and to improve communicative strategies and digital competence.

Google was first released in 1996 and those born after the launch of Google are often referred to as the Gen Z adults; they are the current college-going students who are inclined to be more technologically sophisticated and self-directed than previous generations (Gupta & Gulati, 2014; Thigpen & Tyson, 2021). They have lived their whole lives in an internet and social media era, and, as such, social media usage plays an important role in the lives of these young people and therefore opens up new opportunities for intercultural connections across the globe. According to Vannucci et al. (2018), most emerging adults (18-22 years) are adept in using multiple platforms simultaneously and often spend around six hours a day on social media. Based on this premise, the project leveraged the

pervasiveness of social media usage among young people to promote communication through spontaneous authentic contexts of their daily lives.

In addition, the sociocultural approach to language learning posits that language and social interaction play an important role in the construction of shared knowledge between people by using language as a communicative tool for the purpose of making meaning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). This project offered a platform for social networking for students through virtual connections with other learners around the world and this could potentially provide a rich environment for sociocultural language exchange (Harrison, 2013). Social networking spaces, such as the project live online meetups through Zoom, also offered possible virtual spaces and opportunities for learning by observation, where learners could observe others, interpret their behavior, and adjust their own social networking interaction style (Ryberg & Christiansen, 2008). The rationale of this study was to establish a structure where students could be productive in their interaction with their counterparts from other countries through the use of messaging apps and to provide a prototype that could be replicated in different settings to benefit language learners.

Methods

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the structure of the project in promoting conversations among students in small groups through the use of media and multimodal interaction strategies. It also explores the affordances of social network services by using Telegram, a messaging app, to promote intercultural communication. The number of words and the types of media used in the exchange were analyzed for possibility of correlation. At the end of the project, Japanese students ($N=33$) were asked using Google form, "What was your favorite part of the project, and why?" and a content analysis was done based on their responses.

Platform for Communication

Two communication platforms were considered. In the previous project, students from different countries were connected through Flipgrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com>), which is an educational video posting platform with a concept similar to that of an internet forum or message board for a discussion site, except the participants hold conversations in the form of video messages (Tan, 2019). It was thought that Flipgrid conversation was useful; however, unlike a social media messaging app, it does not allow conversational spontaneity, which is an essential element that contributes to the development of communicative

competence (e.g., Andújar-Vaca & Cruz-Martínez, 2017). Hence, a different platform was considered.

The alternative is a social media messaging app that does not require mobile numbers and there are many, such as Skype (<https://skype.com>), Telegram (<https://telegram.org/>), Discord (<https://discord.com>), LINE (<https://line.me>) and Kik(<https://kik.com>). However, Telegram allows for the creation of channels and groups with 200,000 members, and also supports bots, allowing for large videos and other file types. It is available for Android, iPhone, iPad, Windows, Mac, and the Web (Mushtaq, 2020). In addition, the convenience of having an invitation link to individual groups helps to connect the students efficiently and the export function of the chat history and media proved to be useful for research data collection. Hence, Telegram was decided on over other apps.

Through Telegram, participants could engage in conversations using video presentations, voice recording and texting. As shown in Figure A1 (refer to Appendix A), a student demonstrated how to play a clarinet through a video recording, another student talked about making cream pasta by showing what he was doing through a picture, one student responded with a video recording and another with a voice recording. Such dynamic multimodal conversations allow participants to employ various communicative strategies using different media forms to express their thoughts and convey their ideas (e.g., Anduja, 2016; Madden & Foucher, 2019; Madden & Foucher, 2020). Every participant created a Telegram username and submitted it to their teacher. Unlike other messaging apps like WhatsApp, Telegram does not require telephone numbers, except when creating an account. Hence, it does not disclose one's mobile number.

Participants

Second language (L2) speaking anxiety can be debilitating to some learners and the most frequently cited source of anxiety for L2 learners is speaking with a native speaker of the target language (English). Indeed, studies have shown that L2 learners often tend to intensify their level of anxiety when speaking to native speakers; hence, to encourage more participation and induce less anxiety in using English, the participants in this project were all L2 learners of English (Heng et al. 2012; Mak, 2011). There were 33 Japanese, 16 Turkish, 15 South Korean, 10 Puerto Rican, 7 Filipino, 4 Taiwanese and 2 Israeli students who participated in the project, a total of 87 participants.

Project Content

The project was divided into 3 blocks with 3 weeks allocated to each block. During the first 2 weeks in each block, participants were required to upload a 1-minute video to their group based on the themes given. In the third week, the group leaders were required to organize a live online meetup through Zoom, record the meetings and submit the recordings to their teachers. The live online meetups were at least 30 minutes long. The subjects of conversation for the meetups were provided in the form of Google slides, which included topics related to superstitions, weddings and typical communication styles. Participants were allowed to veer from the suggested topics during their online meetups. After each block, participants were regrouped and the cycle was repeated. In the tenth week, all the teachers involved organized a final live online meetup for all the participants. Participation rate was more than 50%. Table 1 summarizes the content of the 10-week project.

Table 1

Content of a 10-week Project

Week 1 - 3 [Block 1]	Week 4 - 5 [Block 2]	Week 6 - 9 [Block 3]	Week 10 [Super Meetup]	Live
1. Getting to know you	4. A virtual tour	7. Teach me something	10. Final live online meetup with all participants (60 min)	
2. Food	5. Five essential items	8. What you want to know		
3. Live online meetup	6. Live online meetup	9. Live online meetup		

Findings

Correlations between Media Used and Word Count

There were a total of 17 groups in Block 3, and only data from seven groups were available for analysis in this paper. Each week the students were given a theme on which the videos they created were based and they were required to share them with the group; however, there were groups that took the initiative to share photographs and snapshots of their daily lives, and this seemed to have a profound impact on the success of the group in generating conversations. Table 2 shows the modes of communication that took place in the third block, showing both the media count input, which is the number of photographs, videos, links, and voice messages uploaded to the Telegram conversations, and the word count

output, which is the total number of words the group members had generated in three weeks.

Correlation analysis was done to study the strength of the relationship between the number of media used and the number of words produced in each group. Referring to Figure 2 and Table 3, word count output was highly correlated, $r=.833$, to media count input, which was the unit sum of different types of media used. In other words, the more media content each group uploaded, the more conversations were generated. The contrary was also true: the group that had the lowest media count input generated the least word count output during the 3-week period. As shown in Table 3, there was a stronger correlation, $r=.825$, between the number of photographs used as compared to the number of videos used, $r=.635$, and the number of words generated in each group discourse. In general, there was a strong correlation between the number of media used and the number of words generated in each group; a correlation between these variables, however, does not necessarily mean that the change in one variable is the cause of the change in the values of the other variable. A closer study on the exchanges that took place in each group was done to investigate the possibility of a causal effect.

Table 2

Media Count Input and Word Count Output in Block 3 for Groups 10 to 16

Grou p	Photo s	Video s	Links	Voice Messages	Total Media Count	Total Word Count
13	27	11	4	1	43	7 826
14	21	16	5	4	46	4 554
16	6	10	4	1	21	3 161
12	5	10	2	6	23	2 724
15	14	5	7	0	26	2 058
10	5	7	7	1	20	2 018
11	10	3	3	0	16	1 416
<i>Mean</i>	13	9	5	2	28	3394
<i>SD</i>	9	4	2	2	12	2202

Figure 2

Scatter Plot Graph: Media Count Input and Word Count Output

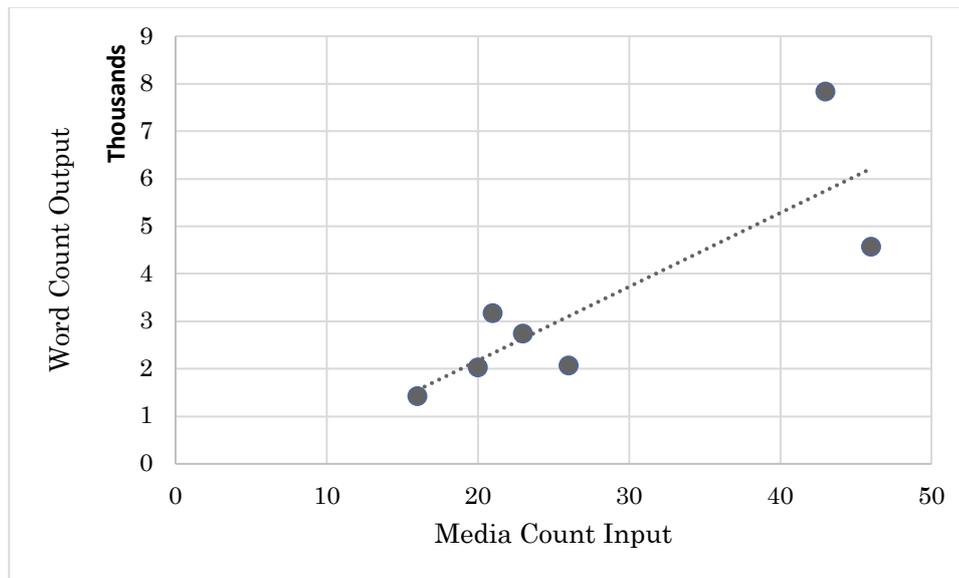


Table 3

Pearson Correlation Matrix

	<i>Photos</i>	<i>Videos</i>	<i>Links</i>	<i>Voice Messages</i>	<i>Total Media Count</i>	<i>Total Word Count</i>
<i>Photos</i>	1					
<i>Videos</i>	0.443	1				
<i>Links</i>	0.078	-0.131	1			
<i>Voice Messages</i>	-0.097	0.630	-0.480	1		
<i>Total Media Count</i>	0.886	0.788	0.079	0.273	1	
<i>Total Word Count</i>	0.825	0.635	-0.146	0.115	0.833	1

The following takes a closer at the exchanges. Figure A2 (refer to Appendix A) shows excerpts of a conversation between students from South Korea, Japan, Turkey and Puerto Rico. The conversation started with a South Korean student posting the process of making his cream pasta lunch. He started with a photograph of him shopping for the ingredients, followed by a photograph on how he cooked his lunch, and finally the plate of cream pasta,

his final product. In between the photographs he posted, they talked about how they could save money by not buying lunch from convenient stores, one student introduced her favorite cooking YouTube channel and talked about how her grandma used to cook during holidays with everyone coming together but how it was no longer possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two students talked about the differences between Turkish and Japanese stuffed cabbage, and the conversation went on with more sharing of videos and photographs.

Another example of how the use of media generated more conversations took place during the Mothers' Day celebration week between students from Japan, Turkey, Puerto Rico and Taiwan, as shown in Figure A3 (refer to Appendix A), an excerpt of the conversation. The group leader mentioned how she celebrated Mothers' Day by uploading a photograph of her Mother's Day chocolate cake, the Puerto Rican student uploaded a photograph of Ferrero Rocher chocolate and mentioned that she gave that to her mother, and the Taiwanese student stated that the family went to a Chinese restaurant to celebrate the occasion and uploaded a photograph of the Chinese dinner at a restaurant. The Puerto Rican student responded to the photograph with, "In Puerto Rico, Chinese restaurant menu are so different." Another student from Japan responded with, "It looks delicious! Authentic Chinese food is different from my image. In Japan, famous Chinese food are ramen, gyoza (fried dumplings) and fried rice." The Taiwanese student responded to the Puerto Rican student with a question, "Really? Where is the difference?" and received a reply with a photograph that explained everything. From the above anecdotes, it can be said that the number of photographs and videos used in the conversation do have a positive effect on the interaction dynamic in each group. Photographs seemed to be a stronger media to generate conversations compared to videos. Overall, it could be deduced that photographs and videos could provide useful media tools to stimulate and drive conversations in the intercultural communication groups organized within this project. However, this remains a deduction, which is one of the limitations of this study, and the causal effect between the use of media and level of engagement cannot be said to be entirely conclusive, as there are other possible interfering factors, such as fluency level, motivation of group members, group size and so on.

Content Analysis

The content analysis of the qualitative data derived from the question, "What was your favorite part of the project, and why?" shows that participants were driven by the need to communicate with their group members and hence their motivation to learn English had

heightened since the beginning of the project. The following section is devoted to the explanation of the four key themes (meaningful and fun, authentic and spontaneous, cultural understanding and live meetup) identified from responses given by Japanese students (refer to Appendix B).

1. Meaningful and fun – The word “fun” appeared frequently in their responses. Fun itself is an element of intrinsic motivation and the participants derived much satisfaction from interacting with other L2 learners of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Their initial inhibitions and anxieties were unwarranted as they started to identify with other interlocutors who made similar grammatical errors as they did and noticed that the errors did not affect speech intelligibility. In other words, participants were intrinsically motivated to use English. It has been shown that interaction using social networking services can produce meaningful output and stimulate students’ interest in language learning (Chartrand, 2012). Proponents of such integration also highlighted the crucial role it has in impacting the development of socio-pragmatic competence in language learners (e.g., Blattner & Fiori, 2011).
2. Authentic and spontaneous – The functional use of the English language became apparent in the process of making new friends, sharing photographs, and engaging in daily conversations. Unlike familiar textbook-based conversational practices, the conversations in this project were authentic and personal, spontaneous and practical. The authenticity of the context made the interactions meaningful, real and enjoyable, which was also highlighted by Kárpáti (2009), where he purported that social networking tools offer the learners an authentic language education environment, which is an important consideration in acquiring high communication skills in a foreign language.
3. Cultural understanding – Interacting with students from other cultures and understanding their daily life firsthand through the group was the best experience. The accessibility of connecting with friends from different cultures gave learning about other cultures a sense of importance and significance. Participants indicated that they had gained an in-depth understanding of other cultures. As shown in figure 4 (refer to Appendix A), participants were able to engage in meaningful conversation and gain deeper understanding about the food culture of their counterparts.
4. Live online meetup – Students enjoyed the live online meetup the most and they wanted to have more of such sessions. It was during such meetups that they were able to have an accurate realization of the English proficiency level of their speaking and listening skills. The meetups created a much closer atmosphere and bonding between the group members. Especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic,

where social distancing and lockdowns have taken away much-needed social connections, such virtual connections become a source of social well-being and the students appreciated that.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the observations and qualitative feedback from the participants, it can be said that the objectives of this project were achieved to a large extent. The structure of the project had provided students the opportunities to participate in authentic conversations that promote virtual communication skills. Fellow L2 learners in the groups provided a safe environment for each other to make mistakes and hence students were able to exercise confidence in the use of English through modeling and employing various communicative strategies to create engaging conversations with friends of different cultural backgrounds.

It is of paramount importance to reduce L2 anxiety in the environment because it has a debilitating effect on the oral performance of the speakers. Language anxiety can be attributed to a range of factors, and, according to Woodrow (2006), one of the most frequent sources of anxiety for L2 learners is interacting with native speakers. Yentürk and Dağdeviren-Kırmızı (2020) also mentioned that, “communication apprehension with native instructors is one of the reasons for language anxiety” (p. 1941). For the above mentioned reason, all students involved in this project were non-native speakers of English, thus providing the students an environment where they felt less inhibited in using the target language (e.g., Aydın, 2008; Takkaç Tulgar, 2018).

The analysis of students’ interactions is in congruence with the findings of Greenhow and Askari (2017), which is that “learners’ experiences in social network sites are shaped by the content they create, upload, and share; by their interaction with other people’s content; and by others’ unanticipated interactions with their digital creations” (p.5). In addition, students also reported they had learned digital skills and improved their “record screen” presentations from each other, and their proficiency in utilizing online tools to facilitate communication and hold virtual meetings had also improved. It can be said that the results may not be limited to the app utilized in this project but may be replicated elsewhere with other apps. Further research needs to be done related to the optimal group size, the live meetup frequency and the activities that are capable of stimulating deeper conversations.

Despite the success of most groups, there were issues with groups that had low participation due to members who were less proactive. Decisions need to be made on the intervention to help recalcitrant members, such as those who did not upload the required videos or contribute to the conversation. The participation of the members in each group was crucial and the role of the group leaders was also considered to be far more important than anticipated. 98.4% of the participants indicated having a positive experience and wanted to join similar projects in the future. The content and structure of the project would need to be revised to ensure the success of each group in future intercultural virtual exchange projects.

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Appendix A

Figure A1

Examples of Multimodal Conversations in Telegram



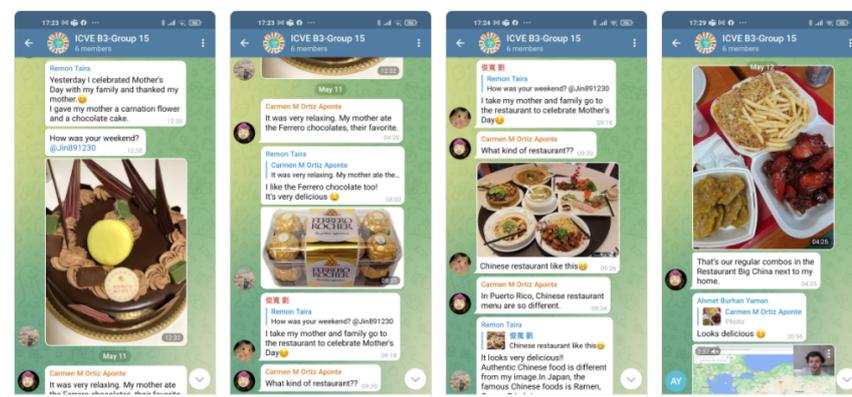
Figure A2

Making Cream Pasta Telegram Excerpts



Figure A3

Mothers' Day Celebration and Chinese Food Telegram Excerpts



Appendix B

Responses from students based on the question, "What was your favorite part of the project, and why?"

- It is sharing picture of each country. Because I can know a lot of things about other country.
- Meeting. Because everyone was kindly with me.
- My favorite part of the project is daily communication. Because I could learn about cultures and their lifestyle
- Meetup project was the best project. It gave me motivation to improve English. And that was so fun.
- I liked talking with other country students because I learn about different cultures.
- One of my favorite parts was texting with other people on telegram every day which made me feel I can communicate with foreign people by using second language.
- When talking about small things. Because I can get a lot of knowledge.
- I did enjoy the live meeting. Because the members can talk as much as they wanted.
- My favorite part of the project is to zoom with members definitely.
- Because I could learn how much I can't speak English and couldn't express my will.
- It drove me up to study and speak English harder!!
- It was group meeting, because I could try my English ability and feel confidence of my skill finally.
- My favorite part of the project was live meetup. Because we can meet using zoom and connect someone who are not English native speaker. We can see each face and hear voice.
- My favorite part of the projects was talking about various countries things within my group and the Super Zoom Meeting. That's because If I hadn't had this project, I couldn't get the chance to talk with people in various countries like Turkey, Korean or Israel.
- Live meeting because we can talk to other countries people.
- Zoom meet. I felt much fun because I can connect foreign people!
- I liked to talk with members about daily life.
- It's because I can see any pictures in their country.
- Improving my listening skill.

- I like second part because I talked with Korean people a lot. It was really fun.
- My favorite project is online talking with Taiwanese students. Because we have almost same English ability. So I can speak English slowly.
- My favorite part is talking on telegram and online meeting, because we can enjoy talking with friends in other countries easily.
- Definitely meetup online! It gave me the courage and confidence to speak.
- It was that there was time enough, I could prepare for what I record as a movie.
- Able to talk to people in different countries. Because I was able to learn about other countries.
- I like to meet up with others. It's because This chance made me realize that I should study English hard more and motivated.
- Telegram, I knew different culture and how to live.
- My favorite part is 5 essential items to take back because I could know other countries culture, famous foods, climate and so on.
- I'm happy by talking with friends. It was fun to send photos.
- I like the video work on souvenirs. Many people were planning a trip to each other's country, and we were able to talk very meaningfully.
- Because I can get to know Japanese culture and I can get to know the culture of other countries.
- Food. I'm really interested in worldwide food.
- Live meetup. Super meetup was very interesting because I talked with many people about each hobby.

Author's Biography

Eng Hai Tan is currently teaching English Communication, Basic Academic English and Business English courses in Japan. His research interests include intercultural communication, pedagogy, educational technology and student motivation.