



The Impact of the SMILE Project on Thai EFL Learners: Collaborations between Thai and Japanese L2 Learners

Prapaipun Pornthanachotanan^a, Shigenori Wakabayashi^{*b}, Jun Iio^c, Junji Sakurai^d, Yohei Honda^e, Teera Insawat^f, and Pornsiri Singhapreecha^g

^a p.kid1412@gmail.com, Watsuthiwararam School, Thailand

^b swkbys37@gmail.com Faculty of Letters, Chuo University and **WILL, Japan

^c iiojun@tamacc.chuo-u.ac.jp, Faculty of Global Informatics, Chuo University and **WILL, Japan,

^d sakurai@sekisaibo.co.jp, Sekisaibo LLC and **WILL, Japan

^e yohei-h@hs.chuo-u.ac.jp, Chuo University High School, Japan

^f zz_zai@yahoo.com, The Chuo-Thammasat Collaboration Center, Thailand

^g pornsiri.s@litu.tu.ac.th, Language Institute, Thammasat University, Thailand

**WILL: Workshop Initiatives for Language Learning, Japan

* Shigenori Wakabayashi, swkbys37@gmail.com

APA Citation:

Pornthanachotanan, P., Wakabayashi, S., Iio, J., Sakurai, J., Honda, Y., Insawat, T., & Singhapreecha, P. (2024). The Impact of the SMILE project on Thai EFL learners: collaborations between Thai and Japanese L2 learners. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 17(1), 662-687.

Received
01/07/2023

Received in revised
form
27/11/2023

Accepted
07/12/2023

ABSTRACT

This study presents an international collaboration in the Students Meet Internationally through Language Education (SMILE) project and investigates how the SMILE project impacts Thai EFL students. This program provides students with opportunities to use English as an Authentic Communication Tool (E-ACT) by sharing their experiences and culture with high school peers in Japan online. Thirty-one Thai twelfth graders from a public high school in Bangkok participated in the SMILE project in the 2022 academic year. The course of the SMILE project we describe in this paper consisted of four collaboration classes (50 minutes, four times), and each class consisted of two sessions (25 minutes, twice). In

	<p>each session, the Thai students met Japanese students in the same school grade in small groups with four or five students in total. These classes were conducted via online channels. Thai students' data were collected from class observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The results revealed that the Thai students 1) increased their confidence in using English, 2) gained broader perspectives from the cultural exchange sessions, 3) were eager to have similar collaborations with new Japanese students, and 4) showed clear enjoyment in their activities. Given these benefits, we conclude that the experience that student participants gained through the SMILE project had a substantial impact on them, which is likely to change their attitude toward studying English in the future. Besides, we discuss how current approaches to learner psychology may or may not be applied to our findings. Based on the results, the authors argue that having students with different first languages meet online should be conducted more widely in EFL circumstances.</p> <p>Keywords: international collaboration, internet, ICT, impact, confidence</p>
--	--

Introduction

This study describes an international collaboration course based on the SMILE Project conducted between a Thai high school and a Japanese high school in the academic year 2022. It discusses its impact on the students based on data collected during and after the course.

English is a necessary communication tool for the educated population in the current world. It is a commonly used spoken language worldwide, with one out of five people in the world speaking it (Nishanthi, 2018). Around 375 million people use English as their first language, and 750 million use it as a second language; it is the official language in many countries and international organizations (Reddy, 2016). English also plays a vital role in education. Knowing English benefits any student worldwide as many internet resources, textbooks, or learning materials are written in English. Moreover, high scores on an English proficiency test are generally required to study abroad, even in countries where English is not the official language.

On the other hand, the socio-cultural context of the acquisition of English as a second language (L2) is often divided into English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Although no evidence suggests that learners' cognitive basis for second language

acquisition differs between these situations (see, e.g., Slabakova, 2016), the opportunities for learners to use English differ. Learners in an ESL context may have many opportunities to use English for communication, although there is variation (see Schumann, 1976), while limited opportunities are available for learners to use it in an EFL situation in general. In countries like Thailand and Japan, most learners (or all learners in most cases) share their first language in their regular English class. Therefore, even if English teachers try to create communicative tasks for learners to interact in an English lesson orally, the activity is inauthentic in the sense that they do much better in their first language in an authentic way: The learners have no genuine reason for using English to communicate, which likely leaves students relatively unmotivated to use the language.

Some may think that the globalization status quo mentioned above should straightforwardly facilitate effective or better English education in Thailand. However, our world is not that simple. In fact, in current secondary education in Thailand, most students appear to have little opportunity to regard the social and educational requirement of utilizing English for communication as their own personal issue. Moreover, even if they understand that they may need English in the (near) future, “understanding” may have little influence on their behavior, probably because the (near) future exists at a distance in their mind, reflecting the fact they have spent most of their lifetime in school or with family in relatively limited social circumstances. In other words, only a very thin link between the activities in class, their (near) future, and the “real” global world may exist in students’ minds.

Then, why do learners study English? Many high school students, if not all, appear to study English as a required subject. In the type of class where knowledge is transmitted from teacher to students with a shared first language, there is memorization and operations for items and grammatical rules, with occasional use of what has been learned in (mock) communication, in role plays or tasks, despite everyone’s awareness that such communication is more-or-less meaningless as communication itself. Some may study to make teachers happy and/or to gather respect from peers or for some other reasons (cf. Dörnyei, 2020), such as to obtain a good mark on a test.

Now let us consider what the students in regular classes do and what they need to acquire for English communication. Figures 1a and 1b illustrate what students do in a conventional type of class. In Figure 1a, the trainer is showing a trainee how to make sushi, and the trainee then mimics what the expert is doing in the same way that students practice pronunciation by mimicking what the teacher presents to them. In Figure 1b, the teacher explains the system of English, such as grammar, to the students. These activities may be referred to as knowledge transmission. How good the

students are at mimicking a model or demonstrating their understanding of the rules and their memorized vocabulary as measured on a test, based on which they get marks for academic credit.

However, language, as a cognitive system, cannot be established through these activities alone. Knowledge of language can be depicted as in Figure 2a, where language connects sounds and meanings. This knowledge is put to use in communication, as illustrated in Figure 2b, where the two boys are chatting: In their mind, “language” is utilized by connecting sounds and meanings, along with other information for communication, including producing and recognizing facial expressions and gestures. The activation and utilization of this system take place on the spot at the time of communication. No current theory of second language acquisition suggests that the linguistic system needed for interaction in a second language can be acquired without authentic communicative interaction (VanPatten et al., 2020).

Figure 1

Illustration of Activities in Conventional English Classes

a. Mimicking



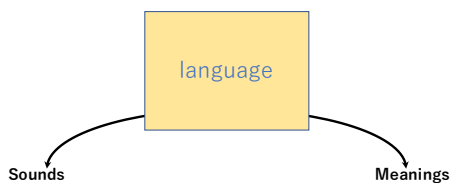
b. Absorbing



Figure 2

Knowledge and Use of Language

a. Knowledge



b. Use



Therefore, English classes should provide students with opportunities to use English for communication. However, oral communication practice in regular classes among learners sharing a first language is inauthentic since the available first language functions better for communication. Here, collaboration classes in which learners with different first languages meet, such as the SMILE project (see next section), are helpful. This project provides students with classes where they communicate with people who do not share their first language. Therefore, English becomes an authentic tool for communication in such a situation, where no language other than English can be used in common among participants in the conversation. We will call this authentic use “English as an Authentic Communication Tool (E-ACT).”

Figures 1 and 2 may remind some education researchers of the difference between traditional teacher-centered lectures and student-centered pedagogy, often discussed in the literature on collaborative learning and cooperative learning (see Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Yang 2023). The most recent form of research in this currency includes Knowledge Forum (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006, 2010) and Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning. From this point of view, the SMILE project may be placed under the umbrella of collaborative learning, including cooperative learning, in the sense that students interact with one another in the classroom with little intervention by teachers. In other words, they learn among themselves. However, “collaboration” in the SMILE project goes beyond this traditional way of collaborative learning since, in fact, the collaboration extends beyond

the classroom. The students meet internationally online: In our case, in two classrooms 4,600 km apart from each other (in Tokyo and Bangkok), students met and collaborated to study together.

The widespread use of online conference systems through internet connections with user-friendly applications, which became highly accessible during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, has made the SMILE project available and accessible. A description of the project will be given shortly. In brief, it allows students to meet online and use English with high school students from different countries in small groups (four or five students in one group). This article describes how the SMILE project was conducted between Thai and Japanese schools and how Thai students utilized English there. The data collected in this study indicate that this project boosted their positive emotion, motivation, and confidence in using English.

Previous Studies of International Collaborations for English Language Education

Students' experiences interacting in the target language have been reported to impact their motivation and other aspects of language and intercultural attitudes, but studies of online collaboration remain limited in number. In fact, many studies have been conducted to document the effects of short- and long-term visits to countries where English is used as the local language (Loewen, 2020), but the number of studies that report results of online interaction between EFL learners, such as Freiermuth (2011), appears to be small. We conducted a search for previous studies using the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database <<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=>> on the 25th of September 2023. The results with keywords "International collaboration TESOL" found only four papers published between 2004 and 2023 (20 years): One is about the curriculum, two are about teacher education, and the other concerns education equality. With keywords "International collaboration EFL," the number increased to 21, including 18 articles, two conference proceedings, and a book, among which seven studies deal with university or higher education, four with teacher education, two with elementary school, one with international school, three with materials and methods, such as media literacy, team teaching, and testing, as their main focus. Only two papers in the two conference proceedings dealt with high school projects. As can be seen from this short search, our observation seems to be validated.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) resembles the SMILE project, but those programs are conducted at the university level (SUNY COIL Center, 2023). The purpose of COIL is not primarily to offer opportunities for students to interact in foreign languages but to obtain

specific skills and knowledge of the target area, such as engineering (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020). Naturally, the topics in collaboration classes in COIL are specific to learners' areas of study. In fact, several courses of the SMILE project have been carried out at the university level as well, and their contents are similarly more content-based, like those in COIL (See Iio et al., submitted; Wakabayashi et al., 2023).

English Education in Thailand and the High School

In Thailand, English is a foreign language. The Thai Ministry of Education has implemented various initiatives and reforms to enhance English language proficiency among Thai students. English Medium Instruction (EMI) is currently promoted in Thailand in both public and private schools, where students learn subjects, such as science, in the English language from native or near-native speakers (Tanielian, 2014). However, challenges remain because learners have limited opportunities to interact in the target language, and in fact, whether the outcomes of EMI can reach the level of understanding where the same content is taught in learners' first language is questionable.

Despite the above-mentioned situation, most students are not strongly motivated to study English, or at least not enthusiastic about using the language orally. Sawir (2005) indicated that students lacked confidence in pronunciation or performance and generally had limited opportunities to practice conversation in class. Most high school teachers, including the first author of this paper, would agree with this description. However, teachers have little, if any, chance to implement steps to solve the problem. How to help our students gain confidence in speaking remains unknown. Here, it is plausible that experiencing English conversation with foreigners may help them to realize that their skills in English can be utilized as E-ACT in the real and meaningful exchanges of messages, and such experience is likely to increase their confidence.

In the Thai high school described in this study, English is taught by English native -speaker teachers and by Thai-speaking teachers. The school is situated in downtown Bangkok and is considered one of the most highly competitive boys' schools in Thailand. In English classes, 40 students study in one English class, five times a week, 50 minutes each. Among these five classes, four classes are taught by a Thai teacher of English, and one class is taught by a native speaker teacher of English. In addition to these compulsory classes, some students may choose an elective English course, where an English native speaker teaches a smaller number of students, normally 20-35, focusing mainly on pronunciation and conversation. The participants of the SMILE project were selected by the first author of the paper, from those who

wanted to join this collaboration project and who studied English in the first author's class. They are well motivated, which was evident in their volunteering to join, but they had had little or no experience interacting with non-Thai peers, so they were excited as well as nervous before the first SMILE project class started.

The SMILE Project: Its Prototype

A typical process in the SMILE project is described in Table 1. First, the teachers meet and agree that they will be involved in the project. Then, they set up further teachers' meetings to decide the topics and schedule. Along with this, the teachers at two schools have their students prepare for the collaboration classes, which usually consist of three or four classes, where they meet online in small groups and discuss the topics. At the end of the course, they have a wrap-up class in each school independently. The outcomes of the course are shared among schools that have conducted a SMILE project in the academic year at a symposium, which is held in February every year. The Workshop Initiatives for Language Learning (WILL) supports the teachers and schools, from the matching of the two schools to the organizing of the symposium.

As mentioned above, SMILE project activities are held online with students from different countries. This may resemble online collaborative learning projects conducted in TESOL and related fields. However, the SMILE project is unique in at least five respects.

One is that the participating students are learners of English with Asian first languages. Generally, neither native speakers nor speakers of European languages are involved. Because Asian languages are typologically different from European languages in general, not only in pronunciation and grammar but also in scripts and lexical items, communicating in English is likely to be more challenging for these learners than for European language (or native) speakers. The equivalence in difficulty using English for students on both sides of the SMILE project facilitates participants' cooperative actions in small-group activities. Although the students' proficiencies in English vary, they all know oral communication in English is challenging, and they cooperate to express what they want to convey in the group discussion and to understand their interlocutors. Participants need skills not only to express themselves but also to elicit or scaffold utterances from their peers in this project. The fact that no target language expert (i.e., native speakers or near-native speakers) is involved is a strength of the program, which allows weaker learners to participate without blaming themselves when the communication breaks down.

The second point is the applicability of the project. The SMILE project is conducted between countries where the time difference is small. The time difference between Thailand and Japan is two hours, so the online and on-time dual-direction collaboration activities can be integrated into regular high school life.

The third point is that the teachers from the two schools and a coordinator from WILL play important roles: They meet each other online several times before and during the collaboration classes. Support from a coordinator is helpful in conducting a collaboration course, even if the teacher has excellent English and ICT skills, because teachers tend to be busy managing their students on one side of the internet. It should be added that WILL also helps to match schools, and its representatives usually visit the teachers at their schools once a year so that the operation of the SMILE project is sustainable. In fact, it is not easy to find English teachers who are willing to join the SMILE project.

Table 1

The standard steps in preparation and process of the SMILE project.

<p><Step 1> Interested teachers contact WILL. WILL make a match between schools.</p>
<p><Step 2> In the meetings among the teachers and supporters (WILL) online, they share the goal of the collaboration, set the date of teachers' meetings, and set the dates, size, and topics of discussion of collaboration classes.</p>
<p><Step 3> Teachers must learn how to utilize ICT tools and applications to conduct the course, and set up the online meeting system (e.g., Zoom) to conduct the course.</p>
<p><Step 4> Teachers prepare for conducting the course at the school by getting permission from the authority (e.g., the Director), sharing the information among colleagues, booking the classrooms (or spaces) suitable for the group activities, selecting the participants, and having participants prepare for collaboration classes, as to contents of discussion in the group activity, including presentations and questions, how to use ICT tools and applications, and English expressions to be used in collaboration classes.</p>
<p><Step 5> The collaboration classes are conducted where a teacher and a coordinator support students to log in during the collaboration classes, and keep time and instruct the beginning and end of the session.</p>

<Step 6>

Teachers share the outcome at the Annual SMILE Project Symposium by making a presentation at the symposium online or on-site or sharing a video and exchanging ideas to improve the project.

The fourth point is that the collaboration class is conducted through the internet with ICT tools so that all activities can be recorded on the individual computers or in the cloud. Therefore, it is possible to review the activities utilizing the video recording system typically equipped with an online conference application or a PC/tablet. Besides, we use a one-stop application called *Dialogbook* (Iio & Wakabayashi, 2020), a newly developed application for the SMILE project, for several functions. The most important one is that it functions as the platform for two schools to share information, such as the URLs for online conference meeting rooms, which prevents the teachers and students from losing track of them. Readers interested in how this application was used in another SMILE project are referred to Wakabayashi et al. (2023).

The last point is that WILL organizes an annual symposium where all the teachers who conducted a course on the SMILE project at any time in the year present how they conducted their SMILE project and what the outcome was. Some teachers invite their students to show what they have done. This event provides participating schools with opportunities to share what they did, and more importantly, teachers and sometimes students have an opportunity to look back on what they have achieved in the course.

Readers may recognize that the SMILE project is beneficial not only to students but also to teachers in the sense that they learn how to create a course. Essentially, we believe the most important and fundamental part of the SMILE project is enthusiastic teachers. No matter whether they are skillful in ICT and collaboration before joining the SMILE project, they can set up this kind of collaborative course. The skills needed for managing the course (and concepts underlying the course) can be learned “on the job” with support from WILL.

The SMILE Project between Thai and Japanese High Schools

To have students experience the authentic use of English for communication, the first author contacted WILL, which operates the SMILE project. WILL matched the Thai high school with a Japanese high school and set up the course content as illustrated in Table 2. During the course, students participated in small group activities with two or three students from each school, resulting in four or five students in each group. Zoom was utilized to

conduct group presentations and discussions. No teacher or facilitator was directly involved in group activities.

This course consisted of four collaboration classes (50 minutes, four times), and each class consisted of two sessions (25 minutes, twice). The members of the groups for each session did not change throughout the course, so they met with the same two groups in each class four times.

In the first collaboration class, students introduced themselves by referring to their school life and daily life. In the second class, they exchanged information about their high school student cultures. They talked about their future in the third class, and in the last class, the Japanese students presented their project work (graduation research) to Thai students, followed by questions and answers. The pictures in Figure 3 were taken during each class.

Participants

Data were collected from the students involved in this collaboration, consisting of 31 Thai students enrolled in a science-math program in the twelfth grade. Informed consent was signed by all the students and parents before starting the project. The Japanese high school is affiliated with a university, so the students do not have to take a general entrance examination for admission to a university, and hence, the curriculum at this high school is rather unique. It includes study for a graduation thesis as a compulsory subject, materials for which were presented in the fourth collaboration class.

Table 2

Dates and Topics in the Collaboration Classes

Class	Date	Topic	Examples of subtopics
1 st	Nov. 10, 2022	School life / Daily life	Subjects/school uniforms/teachers / friends/club activities
2 nd	Nov. 24, 2022	Cultural experiences	Vacation/food/events/clothing/songs/books
3 rd	Jan. 23, 2023	Future plans	Careers / dreams / further studies / marriage / going abroad
4 th	Feb. 6, 2023	Scientific research	Presentation of graduation research by Japanese students and Q&A

Figure 3

Pictures of students in collaboration classes

a. 1st classb. 2nd classc. 3rd classd. 4th class

Methods of Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in three ways during and after the collaboration classes. First, during the classes, the first author (the teacher of the regular English class) observed the students and took notes on what she observed. Secondly, a questionnaire was completed by all students. Thirdly, interview data were collected from some students on a voluntary basis. The students who volunteered all participated in the interview on their own, and all those who showed interest were included without any selection criteria. The call for participation in an interview was announced by the teacher in an ordinary English class just after the third collaboration class, and no further persuasive invitation was delivered.

The Main Research Question

The main research question of this study concerned investigating the impact of the SMILE project on learners' psychological aspects based on the metacognitive data from the survey, interviews, and the investigators' observations. As described above, this project differed from those discussed in previous studies. In this situation, we observe E-ACT, a situation that resembles the situation where monolingual children acquire English as their first language for communication in the sense that the goal is to utilize the system of language, English, to convey what they want to express.

The group members were all in the same age group. Moreover, culturally, economically, and geographically, Thailand and Japan are quite close to each other in the Asian Pacific Rim and appear to share many cultural aspects, such as religion. Therefore, Thai learners may feel close to Japan and be curious about Japanese student life in general. These factors, i.e., authentically using English with same-age peers and with psychologically near mates, could lead to changes in learners' behavior (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The current study investigates whether these characteristics are positive factors that work constructively in the real world.

With the expectations mentioned here in mind, the SMILE project was conducted, and data was collected. How these data can (or cannot) be

analyzed in the Willingness to Communicate framework (MacIntyre et al., 1998: WTC) and in terms of enjoyment and anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2018) will be discussed below in the Discussion section. We should note that, superficially, the students' activities may appear the same as in group discussions in any ordinary classroom with a shared first language and school life. However, their psychological states are very different, so insights in studies on previous factors in English Language classrooms are not straightforwardly applicable to this study. As mentioned in MacIntyre et al.—and we will see in the Discussion—the students' societal and psychological situation is the determinant condition for their WTC, and the situational gap between ordinary classes and the class of the SMILE project is large and substantial.

The following part of this paper reports the SMILE project conducted between Thai and Japanese schools for the first time, and data collected for the first time. Therefore, data collection was exploratory, although it is based on the teachers' professional intuition, and we did not set any hypothesis before data collection. Another point that should be mentioned here is that the internet connection was sometimes poor, and some students were unhappy with it. Nevertheless, as shown below, most replies were very positive. Keeping this in mind, let us look at the data collected in this study. The raw data were collected by the first author as the teacher of the class, who conducted the SMILE project and taught the class throughout the school year.

Data 1: Classroom Observation

Student behavior obviously changed throughout the course. Some students were nervous and silent during the first collaboration class, i.e., they did not talk much at the beginning. However, the students became more active and energetic throughout the four collaboration classes. They indeed produced much more output than in regular English classes.

This was reflected in the frequent use of gestures in the second and third collaboration classes, which were not only used when they did not know how to express themselves in English but also as a supplement or an automatic (unconscious) conveyor of information. In Figure 3b, taken during the second collaboration class, the boy on the right was imitating a fighting form of Thai kickboxing when they talked about their cultures. Using gestures was natural because they used sight information (i.e., cameras) to communicate via the Internet. Students also used pictures and written notes when necessary. As seen in Figure 3c, taken during the third collaboration class, they also used their smartphones to communicate with each other in addition to the main channel on a tablet or PC.

The conversations were left unfinished in most group work activities in each session of the collaboration classes (each class had two sessions, as mentioned above), which may have had positive and negative implications. On the good side, learners were increasingly likely to be eager to take any chance to talk with foreigners in English in the future, even after the SMILE project, if they were given such an opportunity in and out of the classroom. This eagerness may also lead them to be more actively engaged in ordinary English classes. On the bad side, students were not able to reach strong enough relations with their Japanese peers, so they did not keep in contact after the collaboration classes.

Date 2: Interview

Sample extractions from the interviews with Thai students are given below in (1) and (2). They illustrate two issues: One is that students broadened their horizons in terms of cultural knowledge. The students realized that Japanese students' lives might differ from theirs concerning school rules (1a); Japanese students behaved differently from Thai students (1b), and Japanese students' way of learning may differ from their own style.

- (1) a. "Students in Japan don't need to wear a uniform, and the hairstyle is not strictly regulated by the school."
- b. "The Japanese students are quite shy."
- c. "The science projects in Japan are interesting and various. Students are free to select any topic they are interested in and can conduct their project in any field of science."

The second issue is that each collaboration should have had more time.

- (2) a. "We are exchanging the information about green curry of Thailand, and then the time is up, so we need to be back in the main room of Zoom."
- b. "The presentation of Japanese students about the different shades of red color of black tea is interesting for me, but it is a pity that I have too little time to ask them some questions."

From these comments, it is reasonable to conclude that students were happy with the collaboration classes and thought they were beneficial and valuable. This is also reflected in their responses to the questionnaire, which we describe in the following subsection.

Data 3: Questionnaire

A questionnaire containing five questions with five response choices was used to collect data from the 31 Thai students. This survey was carried out as a part of the class to review their activities. A reviewer pointed out that the question items are rather broad and that each item should be hammered down into smaller pieces with more focused elements. We admit that the questionnaire could have been constructed with more items if circumstances allowed. However, the time available for review is very limited in English classes with many contents to cover. Note that nothing has been eliminated from the ordinary class due to the implementation of the SMILE project. Besides, as mentioned above, this study is exploratory rather than hypothesis testing. Examining these collaboration classes involving high schools from different countries has just started. Therefore, a questionnaire with narrowly focused items may have missed some essential points. Moreover, a data set with a broadly focused survey, such as Net Promoter Score, is considered an appropriate tool to evaluate learners' (or consumers') overall satisfaction. In short, we should say this questionnaire was practical and valuable (cf. Iio et al., submitted, and papers cited there). The results are given in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, 90% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that joining the SMILE project had allowed them to use authentic English (Q1) and use English to exchange cultural information (Q2). In addition, 64% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that they became more confident using English for communication after joining the SMILE project (Q3), and more than 80% of the students agreed to participate in this activity in the future (Q4).

Table 3

The Results of the Questionnaire

Questions	*SA	A	N	D	SD
Q1) Participants get a chance to use authentic English by joining the SMILE project.	11 (35%)	17 (55%)	3 (10%)	0	0
Q2) Participants get a chance to use English to exchange cultural information.	13 (42%)	16 (52%)	2 (6%)	0	0
Q3) Participants are more confident in using English for communication after joining the SMILE project.	5 (16%)	15 (48%)	10 (32%)	1 (3%)	0

Q4) Participants are satisfied with the SMILE project and agree to have this activity in the future.	11 (35%)	15 (48%)	5 (16%)	0	0
Q5) Participants get a chance to have new foreign friends from joining the SMILE project.	9 (29%)	8 (26%)	10 (32%)	3 (10%)	1 (3%)

Note. *SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

However, ten students were neutral, and three students either disagreed or strongly disagreed regarding having new foreign friends from joining the SMILE project. The responses to this question were due to the lack of time, as mentioned above, and probably varied depending on students' personalities. In addition, gender may have also played a role here as the Thai students were all males, and the Japanese students included 17 males and 10 females.

All in all, the SMILE project provided students with opportunities to use English to exchange information with foreign peers in an authentic way, and the students enjoyed the activity. Furthermore, motivation and confidence in using English were boosted, and students were aware of it, as shown in classroom observation, in the interview, and in their responses to the questionnaire. In short, the SMILE project's impact on the students was positive and strong. The students requested more time after each collaboration class, and it is generally quite rare (if it ever happens at all) for students to be eager to have an English (conversation) class extended longer than necessary. As seen from this fact, the SMILE project had a powerful impact on the students.

Discussion

First, the class was more active and energetic than the ordinary English lessons. During the collaboration classes, the learners experienced peer-assisted learning. We may say that real collaborative learning in the traditional sense (cf. Yang, 2023) took place, as well as what we call E-ACT. The role of the teachers has changed dramatically from a transmitter of information or knowledge in a non-technical sense to a facilitator who supports students in preparing and reviewing the course. Thus, the teacher stepped away from the center of the class, and the main characters were students. This change of roles was highly recommended by researchers (e.g., King, 1993) and has been challenging to achieve in ordinary English classes but was naturally accomplished in the SMILE project.

How do we interpret our findings in the currencies of research in the fields related to English language teaching? An anonymous reviewer noted that concepts including English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Intercultural Communicative Competence or Intercultural Competence (ICC), and English-Mediated Instruction (EMI) would “make the discussion more complete” (see below.). The underpinning of the SMILE project on current research trends in English language learning research is certainly important. We thank the reviewer on this point, but as we will see below, most of these are not directly relevant.

Let us start with EMI. EMI does not apply here since no “instruction” was involved in the SMILE project in an ordinary sense. Although the efficacy of instruction is often discussed in EMI studies (e.g., Yuan, 2023), the effects on learner motivation are still controversial (Le & Nguyen, 2023). It is difficult, if not impossible, to find in the EMI literature discussion of impact or confidence, as we found the SMILE project to bring to the students. Even EMI’s effect on motivation, which has been extensively discussed in studies in English language teaching (cf. Dörnyei, 2020), is difficult to find. The data we examined above suggest that student motivation to study English is raised with the SMILE project. No matter what language is used for “instruction” before and after the collaboration classes, learners used their own English in the collaboration class activities, which was a new experience for most of the students and made the impact presented in the section above.

Intercultural communicative competence or intercultural competence (ICC) includes some crucial aspects of learners’ psychological and intellectual factors that apply in international collaboration classes, such as attitude, skills, and knowledge, with which learners interact across differences, in our case, between Thai and Japanese cultures. Participation in the SMILE project may have developed students’ traits related to ICC, including curiosity, openness, perspective-taking, and empathy (cf., e.g., Byram, 1997, 2009; Dearthoff, 2006, 2019), but we do not analyze these aspects in this paper, and further studies are certainly required in this respect. As a preliminary report and analysis of the SMILE project, the project’s effect on student ICC is beyond the scope of this study.

From a slightly different viewpoint, we expect that high school learners are unlikely to talk with adults in the same way as they do with their high-school peers. We have no concrete evidence, but it is plausible that generation matters: The group activities among the same generation peers create situations where they interact without much psychological challenge. Should high schoolers have had to interact with middle-aged interlocutors from their own country, where the “same” culture might arguably be shared (for example, Thai high school students interacting with Thai middle-aged adults),

they would likely have been much less active, drawing back their chairs from the discussion table. It appears that a kind of universal (or at least in the region, including Thailand and Japan) high school culture exists in high schoolers' minds. In this sense, the definition of Culture in ICC must be carefully considered, especially when we discuss it in the context of language use. This, too, is beyond our scope, and we leave it to further research.

Now, let us turn to the issues of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which is a sociolinguistic phenomenon within the globalizing society if we consider the term in a conventional way. Discussion in this research field has influenced English language teaching mainly on issues such as ownership of the language and “standard” or “ideal” varieties for language teaching (see Jenkins et al., 2011). The SMILE project provides students with an actual situation where non-native speakers with different first languages use English for authentic and natural communication. Here, the discussion conducted in the academic field of ELF seems to have little direct relevance to the discussion of these students' activities.

Since the SMILE project consists of small group discussions among second language learners and has no straightforward model or target forms for learners to mimic or to learn from, the interaction takes place in their group dynamics, where all participants play the roles of listener, speaker, and observer. As such, participants in each group use and develop their own Interactional Competence (cf. Salaberry & Kunitz, 2019) to communicate with each other, which leads to creating their own discourse. It is natural that speaking, listening, and providing feedback, including back-channeling and producing facial expressions and gestures, are all essential communication skills. To repeat, the participants adjust their English, including producing and interpreting paralinguistic sounds, to communicate with their foreign peers. We suggest that such variations should be discussed in their own light as E-ACT, apart from or in addition to ELF studies. We may naturally need to reconsider Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins, 2000) since many linguistic expressions may not be necessary for communication to achieve a particular goal, especially with visual context available with ICT devices and “culturally” shared knowledge among high school students.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) may appear to be the most appropriate field of inquiry to learner psychology and behavior among the fields suggested by the reviewer referenced above to discuss in the context of the SMILE project. MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed the WTC framework as a situation-based affective factor in learning a foreign language. Although we admit that their proposal is valuable and has offered a useful framework on which much research has been done (e.g., MacIntyre, 2007; Munezane, 2015; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2016), there are a few fundamental problems with adopting the framework of WTC to examine our data.

First, WTC appears to presuppose learners' WTC and their behavior in class have a causal relationship which we find questionable. Although MacIntyre et al. (1998) define WTC "as a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using L2 (p. 547)," they do not thoroughly consider the silent students who are also involved in communication. They see that the students who express their thoughts in class, for example, have higher WTC than those who do not and that classroom activities should be designed to increase such behavior as raising hands in the class when teachers ask questions in the class. We agree that teachers should create conditions where those who want to express themselves are encouraged to do so. However, what about those eager to listen to their peers' thoughts without expressing their own? If they keep silent and concentrate on listening to their peers' utterances, do they lack WTC? Must learners be encouraged to utter their own opinions even when they want to hear others' opinions? In fact, listeners may actively capture the information communicated by the speaker. Most, if not all, of those who did not utter their own opinions were nonetheless involved in "communication" with others in the SMILE project. Some participants who appeared not very active in group discussions mentioned that the collaboration class had been enjoyable and exciting and that they had learned some new things from the group discussion. In other words, the participants' behavior (or intention of behavior) may not reflect how much they are willing to communicate. WTC used in research may not capture the "communication" from the listener's point of view as much as the speaker's.

Let us assume that WTC is a relevant framework to investigate certain aspects of learners' psychological states. MacIntyre et al. (1998) correctly point out that WTC must be situation-based and conclude their paper with the following statement: "[T]he addition of WTC to the literature on language learning may help orient theory and research toward the ultimate goal of language learning: authentic communication between persons of different language and culture backgrounds" (p.559). If authentic communication between persons with different first languages and cultural backgrounds is the goal of language learning, then those who participated in the SMILE project have already reached it. They DID communicate with those who do not share their languages and cultural backgrounds. Then, further studies should investigate why, how, and what the learners communicate, giving them opportunities like the course described here. Hence, we do not discuss our results from the viewpoint of WTC. Rather, what we need to describe is not the "willingness" but "psychological states" and/or "cognitive and behavioral activities" while they are engaged in communication in specific situations. By doing this, it might become possible to study individual learners' traits that

yield certain psychological and behavioral states in the context of L2 communication. This is an issue open to further study.

From the point of view of describing learners' psychological states, one possible approach may be to investigate learners' enjoyment, which has recently received attention (van Batenburg et al., 2019). Enjoyment is generally opposed to boredom. As we report from the interview data, even those who were worried about their oral communication skill before joining the SMILE project—this condition that might be understood as anxiety or excitement but not boredom—found themselves enjoying themselves in online communication. Yuya Nakagawa (p.c. to the second author, August 2023) suggested that a possible framework to investigate learner psychology might be the study of FLOW, developed in a series of studies by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). We leave this line of investigation to future research.

There may exist many ways to investigate the achievements, benefits, shortcomings, and problems with online collaboration projects. The data we collected here are primarily metacognitive. We have not conducted any analyses of student behavior, such as quantitative analysis of student verbal and non-verbal output. Data analysis of video recordings of the group discussion might lead to new methods to measure learner development. For example, Aphichokchai et al. (2023), after conducting the SMILE project at another high school in Bangkok with another high school in Japan, reported that Thai students called on their teacher for help frequently during the first session, but much less in the third collaboration class. A systematic review and reflection by teachers and students, including video recordings and the learning management system software application, such as *Dialogbook*, should be utilized to support this observation. This line of investigation is left for further research.

Another line of study should investigate group dynamics. It would also be noteworthy to see how scaffolding is constructed (cf., e.g., Vygotsky, 1978) and how interactional competence develops among learners (cf., e.g., Hall et al., 2011). These are all left to future studies. When EFL learners with different first languages communicate with E-ACT, there is no textbook or model for their activities. Such activities are genuinely communicative without mimicking native speaker models or looking for “model” answers. The SMILE project utilizing the English language, along with information and communications technology, provides EFL learners with conditions for genuine use of English for communicative purposes. Studies on how communication takes place in such situations, as well as how learners develop their skills and what psychological states they experience in E-ACT situations, are questions that remain to be answered.

Lastly, we need to consider the actual and ideal situations in school in general. Some may wonder why collaboration classes were not conducted throughout a term or academic year. In practice, given the current school situation, students must study other subjects and other English lessons, so increasing the number of collaboration classes would be extremely difficult. Besides, even though the number of collaboration classes was limited, it is nevertheless valuable because the impact of the course is strong enough for students to change their psychological states, as has been demonstrated in this article. The SMILE project had a tremendous impact. From the first author's experience as a high school teacher, such an effect appears difficult to obtain from any other English class format.

As mentioned earlier, the course within the SMILE project described in this paper constitutes an initial endeavor for the international collaboration course between Thai and foreign high schools with small group discussions in English, organized as part of school activities. As research based on the data presented here, this study remains primitive and preliminary, and the discussion can be expanded upon from many perspectives. On the other hand, as an educational project, the SMILE project is of excellent value. Based on three kinds of data, we argue that having students with different first languages meet online should be conducted more widely in EFL circumstances. Many students will surely change their perspectives on language learning through the experience.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reported how the SMILE project was implemented in a Thai high school and what impact it had on Thai students. All the data, i.e., classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires, showed that the SMILE project encouraged students to use English to share information about their own experiences and cultural aspects of their lives with high school peers in Japan. In addition, we showed with the data that the SMILE project helped boost student motivation and confidence in using English and widened their cultural horizons. We also introduced a new term, E-ACT, which we believe should be considered more fully and discussed in greater detail in further studies of English language education.

Acknowledgments

Part of this study was presented at the Foreign Language Learning and Teaching conference (FLLT2023), Language Institute Thammasat University and Microsoft Thailand, 9-10 June 2023, in Bangkok, Thailand. We thank Yuya Nakagawa, Mie University, Japan, and two anonymous

reviewers for their insightful comments. We also thank John Matthews, Chuo University, Japan, for his comments on the English and contents. All shortcomings and errors are, of course, our own. This study was supported by a Chuo University Grant for Special Research and Chuo University Promoting Research Period to Shigenori Wakabayashi, a Chuo University Grant for Research Cluster Formation (PI: Jun Iio, Co-I: Shigenori Wakabayashi, and Junji Sakurai), and KAKENHI (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research C) No. 22K00689 (PI: Jun Iio, Co-I: Shigenori Wakabayashi).

About the Authors

Prapaipun Pornthanachotanan: A full-time English teacher at Watsuthiwararam School, Bangkok, Thailand. She obtained her MA from the Language Institute, Thammasat University.

Shigenori Wakabayashi: A professor of Applied Linguistics, Chuo University, Japan, and Representative Director of the Workshop Initiatives for Language Learning (WILL). His research interests focus on the innovation of educational programs and modeling second language acquisition.

Jun Iio: A professor of Computer Science, Chuo University, Japan, and Director of WILL. His research focuses on ICT application in education and other human activities.

Junji Sakurai: A COE of Sekisaibo LLC and Director of WILL. He is an expert in material and course design for education.

Yohei Honda: A full-time English teacher at Chuo University High School. He obtained an MA from Sophia University, Tokyo.

Teera Insawat: A full-time coordinator at The Chuo-Thammasat Collaboration Center, Thailand.

Pornsiri Singhapreecha: A professor of Linguistics, Language Institute, Thammasat University, Thailand. Her areas of research are SLA and syntax in generative grammar.

References

Aphichokchai, A., Wakabayashi, S., Iio, J., Sakurai, J., & Insawat, T. (2023, July 9). High school students' confidence in speaking English and attitude to an ICT-based international collaboration. Paper presented at Foreign Language Learning and Teaching Conference (FLLT2023), Microsoft Headquarters, Bangkok.

- Appiah-Kubi, P., & Annan, E. (2020). A review of a collaborative online international learning. *International Journal of Engineering Pedagogy*, 10(1), 109–124. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijep.v10i1.11678>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. (2009). Intercultural competence in foreign languages: The intercultural speaker and the pedagogy of foreign language education. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of Intercultural Competence* (pp. 321–332). Sage Publications.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Deardorff, D. K. (2019). *Manual for developing intercultural competencies: Story circles*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429244612>
- Dewaele, J.-M., Witney, J., Saito, K., & Dewaele, L. (2018). Foreign language enjoyment and anxiety: The effect of teacher and learner variables. *Language Teaching Research*, 22(6), 676-697. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817692161>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2020). *Innovations and challenges in language learning motivation*. Routledge.
- Education Resources Information Center (2023, September 25). ERIC—Institute of Education Sciences. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=>
- Freiermuth, M. R., & Huang, H.-C. (2012). Bringing Japan and Taiwan closer electronically: A look at an intercultural online synchronic chat task and its effect on motivation. *Language Teaching Research* 16(1), 61-88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1362168811423341>
- Hall, J. K., Hellermann, J., & Doehler, S. P. (Eds.) (2011). *L2 interactional competence and development*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1976.tb00283.x>
- Iio, J., & Wakabayashi, S. (2020). Dialogbook: A proposal for simple e-portfolio system for international communication learning. *International Journal of Web Information Systems*, 16 (5), 611-622. <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mcb/ijwis/2020/00000016/0000005/art00006>
- Iio, J., Miyamoto, Y., & Wakabayashi, S. (submitted). Lessons learned from intercultural communication classes of the SMILE Project. *Proceedings of AsiaTEFL2023*.
- Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford University Press.

- Jenkins, J., Cogo, A., & Dewey, M. (2011). Review of developments in research into English as a lingua franca. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 281–315. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000115>
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1999). *Learning together and alone: Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning* (5th ed.). Allyn and Bacon.
- King, A. (1993). From sage on the stage to guide on the side. *College Teaching*, 41(1), 30–35.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27558571?origin=JSTOR-pdf>
- Le, N. T., & Nguyen, D. T. (2023). Student satisfaction with EMI courses: The role of motivation and engagement. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 15(3), 762-775. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-02-2022-0050>
- Loewen, S. (Ed.). (2020). *Introduction to instructed second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (2007). Willingness to communicate in the second language: understanding the decision to speak as a volitional process. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91(4), 564–576.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00623.x>
- MacIntyre, P. D., Dörnyei, Z., Clément, R., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing Willingness to Communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545-562.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x>
- Munezane, Y. (2015). Enhancing Willingness to Communicate: Relative effects of visualization and goal setting. *The Modern Language Journal*, 99(1), 175–191.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12193>
- Nishanthi, R. (2018). The importance of learning English in today world. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, 3, 871–874. <https://doi.org/10.31142/ijtsrd19061>
- Reddy, S. (2016). Importance of English language in today's world. *International Journal of Academic Research*, 4(2), 179–18.
[http://ijar.org.in/stuff/issues/v3-i4\(2\)/v3-i4\(2\)-a021.pdf](http://ijar.org.in/stuff/issues/v3-i4(2)/v3-i4(2)-a021.pdf)
- Salaberry, M. R., & Kunitz, S. (ed.) (2019). *Teaching and testing L2 Interactional Competence: bridging theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Sawir, E. (2005). Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal*, 6(5), 567–580.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ855010.pdf>

- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (2006). Knowledge building: theory, pedagogy, and technology. In K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Cambridge handbook of the learning sciences* (pp. 97–118). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139519526.025>
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (2010). A brief history of knowledge building. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 36(1), 1–16.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ910451.pdf>
- Schmann, J. H. (1976). Second language acquisition: The pidginization hypothesis. *Language Learning*, 26(2), 391–408.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1976.tb00283.x>
- Slabakova, R. (2016). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- SUNY COIL Center (2023, September 25). *Connect. Engage. Collaborate*.
<https://coil.suny.edu/>
- Tanielian, A. R. (2014). Foreign language anxiety in a new English program in Thailand. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 13(1), 60–81.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/229430777.pdf>
- Van Batenburg E. S. L., Oostdam, R. J., van Gelderen, A. J. S., Fukkink, R. G., & de Jong, N. H. (2019). Oral Interaction in the EFL Classroom: The effects of instructional focus and task type on learner affect. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(1), 308–326.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/45171999>
- VanPatten, B., Keating, G. D., & Wulff, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Theories in second language acquisition: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wakabayashi, S., Iio, J., Kumaraguru, R., Komoto, R., & Sakurai, J. (2023). How ICT tools support a course centered on international collaboration classes. In T. Keane, C. Lewin, T. Brinda & R. Bottino (Eds.), *Towards a collaborative society through creative learning* (pp. 261–274). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-43393-1_24
- Yang, X. (2023). A historical review of collaborative learning and cooperative learning. *TechTrends*, 67, 718–728.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-022-00823-9>
- Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to Communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(1), 54–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4781.00136>
- Yashima, T., MacIntyre, P. D., & Ikeda, M. (2016). Situated willingness to communicate in an L2: Interplay of individual characteristics and context. *Language Teaching Research*, 22(1), 115–137.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168816657851>

Yuan, R. (2023). Promoting English-as-a-Medium-of-Instruction (EMI) teacher development in higher education: What can language specialists do and become? *RELC Journal: A Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 54(1), 267–279.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220980173>