



The Impact of Internet-Based International Small-Group Activities on Students in the Countryside

Muhammadheesam Mayuroh^a, Shigenori Wakabayashi^{b,*}, Jun Iio^c

^a muhammadheesam.pj@ry.ac.th, Rattaphumwittaya School, Thailand

^b swkbys37@gmail.com, Faculty of Letters, Chuo University and WILL: Workshop Initiative for Language Learning, Japan

^c iiojun@tamacc.chuo-u.ac.jp, Faculty of Global Informatics, Chuo University and WILL: Workshop Initiative for Language Learning, Japan

*Corresponding author, swkbys37@gmail.com

APA Citation:

Mayuroh, H., Wakabayashi, S., & Iio, J. (2025). The Impact of Internet-Based International Small-Group Activities on Students in the Countryside. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 18(2), 410-429. <https://doi.org/10.70730/BJRQ1304>

Received
01/02/2025

Received in revised
form 08/05/2025

Accepted
15/05/2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of collaboration classes through the internet carried out amongst Thai and Japanese students under the Students Meet Internationally through Language Education (SMILE) project on a group of Thai high school students in a rural area. This study examines how online collaboration classes increased their confidence and self-evaluation of their own English abilities, cultural awareness, and skills with Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The duration of the program's collaboration was three weeks; each week, two Thai students were assigned to meet online with the same two Japanese students to discuss different topics and exchange information with one another. The participants included twelve students from upper secondary schools in Thailand and Japan (i.e., N = 24). Data were collected from the Thai students via an online questionnaire and an interview after the course. Our data show that collaboration classes through the internet had strong positive effects on the students: They provided them with a genuine

	<p>international environment in which to communicate in English, helping to raise their cultural awareness alongside other important points that should be cultivated in pre-secondary education. Most students were eager to join collaboration classes through the internet once again because they enjoyed utilizing their second language, English, as an authentic tool for communication. The overall project made a significant impact on the students, raising their confidence and enhancing their internal motivation.</p> <p>Keywords: online collaboration, ICT, internet, confidence, motivation</p>
--	--

Introduction

This paper presents outcomes from the Students Meet Internationally through Language Education (SMILE) project conducted between Rattaphumwittaya School in Thailand and Ichihara Chuo High School in Japan during the 2022 academic year and explores the impact thereof on the Thai high school students. The main event in the SMILE project is a series of collaboration classes among learners of English as a foreign language who are of the same age but do not share the same first language. Our data show that the SMILE project provided Thai students with opportunities for authentically using the target language, without a socio-linguistic power imbalance among participants. One aspect of the SMILE project is that all the students are second language learners of the target language. No first language speakers or those with native-like command of the target language participate in the activity. Therefore, learners do not blame themselves for communication breakdown. In fact, our learners all enjoyed talking without fear of making errors. Communication and collaboration in small group activities led the groups of students from the two countries to become communities where they supported each other and built solidarity through the course.

In the age of globalization, English is a *lingua franca* used worldwide, and it is said to play a considerable role in people's daily lives. This may be happening even in rural areas in Thailand. In fact, in the world outside school, globalization, including the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community prior to the end of 2015, has impacted Thai society and placed great importance on foreign-language education. Many educational institutions strive to teach students to communicate in English, trying to offer students an English atmosphere or language environment. However, such efforts are seldom successful. English is a "foreign language subject" for Thai students, at least in the experience of the students who participated in the SMILE project reported here, and is far from their daily "real" lives. Most

study English because they must earn credits or pass examinations. Some find it difficult to maintain interest in their English lessons because they cannot see the point in learning English as a foreign language (cf. Oranpattanachai, 2013). Moreover, Thai English teachers may teach them with the sole aim of them attaining skills needed for obtaining good marks on tests, and they generally provide instructions in Thai most of the time. This lack of target-language input (and output) may cause a situation where students can barely imagine how exciting it is to utilize their foreign language skills successfully. One way to resolve the situation is to introduce them to non-Thai people, so that they come to understand that what they learn in classrooms is truly useful. Consequently, they will hopefully become confident in utilizing the language skills they learned in the classroom.

A reviewer pointed out that “Thai students have experienced little chances for quality language input and meaningful pushed output seems to run counter to what is happening now, given the easy access to English-rich social media.” The fact that English-rich social media surrounds us is a fact, but whether students actively use this to get input and produce output is another question. Although Thai students have greater access to English-rich content through the internet, studies suggest that such access does not automatically lead to effective language learning. For example, Daraha (2013) reported that high school students in Pattani mainly used the internet for entertainment and social interaction, with limited engagement in activities facilitating English language acquisition. Moreover, our experience and anecdotal review tell us that it is plausible that Thai high school students have access to internet resources more often in Thai than in English and they seldom make English output on the internet. Even if they do, they have little chance to exchange information in English except in a very limited situation, such as when they play online games¹.

The advancement of technology during and after the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the situation in Thai high schools. Online classes became common, and the basis for collaboration classes through the internet was established throughout Thailand. Teachers and students have become accustomed to using Zoom or other online conference systems to communicate via the internet.

Collaboration classes with foreign students over the internet benefit Thai students who otherwise do not need to use English in their daily lives. One of the most important benefits is that the students (and the teachers) must use English in order to communicate, which Pornthanachotanan et al. (2024) refer to as English as an Authentic Communication Tool (E-ACT). Another important aspect is that students become accustomed to another variety of spoken non-native English. This situation is more “authentic” than in classes where a (near-)native-speaker English teacher uses the target language in a way tailored to their students understanding, i.e., an instance of

so-called teacher talk. Moreover, the interlocutors in the SMILE project are all non-native speakers of English (in our case, Thai and Japanese students), so they naturally try to help one another to make themselves understood, and all participating students feel less threatened and more comfortable using the language. Another important aspect is that the classroom situation is a real reflection of the physical world: Non-native speakers use English authentically throughout Asia (e.g., in companies where Japanese and Thai business peers work together).

Collaborative learning has a long history in the classroom. Gokhale (1995) defined collaborative learning as a management strategy for a classroom where students of different performance levels work together in small groups toward a common goal. In collaborative learning, students are responsible for each other's learning as well as their own. This is the same in online classes: The strategy of collaborative courses can be seen as an expanded version of traditional collaborative learning from on-site to online. In the SMILE project, we have further expanded the notion of this collaborative learning from group work among students at different performance levels to group work among students with different first languages.

Several studies have reported the framework of the SMILE project and its achievements at different schools. Iio et al. (2021) is the first study to report quantitative and qualitative analysis of students' feedback and reported a significant increase in vocabulary and syntactic complexity in their writing through their participation in the SMILE project held between high schools in Japan and Taiwan. Wakabayashi et al. (2023) reported a similar analysis of changes in students' reflections on the collaboration classes in the SMILE project between Japanese and Malaysian universities. Although they reported that the significant increase in vocabulary and complexity found in Japanese high school students' performance in Iio et al. (2021) was not obtained in this study, they attribute the difference between high school and university students to differences in learner proficiency and experience: High school students were not good at expressing what they expected to do in the collaboration classes at the start of the project, but university students had clear expectations about their upcoming collaboration classes and were already proficient enough to express them. From a different viewpoint, Wakabayashi et al. analyzed qualitative data on university students' development: The number of metalinguistic mentions among students regarding the contents of their interactions increased from first to the third collaboration classes, and they expressed their enjoyment of the class as well as their interest in the contents they had dealt with.

Pornthanachotanan et al. (2024) report on SMILE projects between Thai and Japanese high schools. They collected quantitative and qualitative data through questionnaires, interviews, and teacher observations. They

concluded that Thai students increased in confidence, broadened their cultural perspectives, wanted to participate in this kind of collaboration class again if given another chance, and enjoyed themselves through the course. The authors suggest that the situation in the collaboration classes in the SMILE project provided the students with opportunities for E-ACT. We want to point out here that E-ACT resembles in some ways the situation where children acquire English as their first language insofar as their goal is to utilize language, in this case English, to convey what they want to express. Of course, levels of physical, cognitive, and social maturity are different between students and infants. Still, their eagerness to understand their interlocutors' output, to express themselves, and to make a solid "community" among the participants in the conversation appears to be on the same track.

All the studies cited above show positive effects on the students. This study is similar to Pornthanachotanan et al. (2024) and in this sense may appear to report nothing new, but at least the social and geographical contexts are different: The students in Pornthanachotanan et al. may likely have opportunities to use English outside of the classroom more often than those in the current study because their school is situated in Bangkok. We also agree with a LEARN reviewer, who commented, "[t]he research focus is not original, albeit useful." Even if the English course reported here had been the same as in the previous study, this study would be valuable because the teachers and the students are different. If we obtain similar results, we can conclude that the SMILE project is a promising course that brings students an exciting and enjoyable experience with high reliability.

The rest of this paper will be structured as follows: The next section describes the context of this study, presenting the school and its environment. The SMILE project will be illustrated, focusing on its four dimensions. After this, we will set up research questions and present the research design, including how the data were collected and analyzed. Then, we will discuss what the SMILE project offered to the participants, how impactful this course was, and the implications of this study to English language (or foreign language) education in general. A short conclusion will be given at the end.

Contexts of This Study

Rattaphumwittaya School is a medium-sized secondary school located in southern Thailand in Rattaphum District, Songkhla Province. It offers lower and upper secondary education (Grades 7 to 12) and operates under the Secondary Educational Service Area Office Songkhla-Satun. The school is approximately 25 kilometers from Hat Yai, a major urban and economic center in the south, and about 750 kilometers from Bangkok. Although not located in a tourist-heavy area, the school benefits from its proximity to urban

zones, enabling students to be partially exposed to the influences of modernization and globalization.

The school's 2024 vision statement underscores the development of students' digital literacy and English language proficiency. It aims to equip learners with essential ICT skills and the ability to communicate effectively in English across the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This vision aligns with Thailand's national education policy, emphasizing 21st-century competencies. Rattaphumwittaya School also operates specialized programs in science, mathematics, and foreign languages, and regularly organizes cross-cultural exchange activities, including online and in-person English camps with foreign volunteers.

Currently, the school serves 1,089 students across 33 classrooms. The teaching staff consists of 78 personnel, including 11 English teachers—eight Thai and three native speakers. Students receive a minimum of three hours of English instruction per week, depending on their academic program. The curriculum employs coursebooks such as *New Frontier*, *New World*, and *Spark*, with many teachers integrating digital tools, YouTube videos, and educational apps to enrich classroom instruction. Despite the school's active promotion of technology integration and access to online English resources, preliminary observations suggest that students frequently use the internet more for entertainment than language learning (see above).

This dynamic context—marked by institutional support, international exposure, and evolving educational practices—provides a rich setting for exploring how English language education and digital resource utilization intersect in practice.

The SMILE Project and Its Dimensions

The SMILE Project

In response to the educational goals and contexts described in the last section, the first author initiated and implemented the SMILE project, an internet-based collaboration initiative to enhance English communication, intercultural competence, and digital literacy among Thai students. The timetable of the SMILE project conducted in this study is chronologically depicted in Table 1, including information on how it was prepared. The main event was three collaboration classes on the 15th, 21st, and 29th of November 2022.

Table 1*The Major Events for Conducting the SMILE Project*

Jun. 2022	The proposal letter to join the SMILE project was sent to Workshop Initiatives for Language Learning (WILL) and was accepted.
Jul. 2022	The delegation of WILL visited Rattaphumwittaya school and presented the theoretical backgrounds and practical information to the teachers.
Oct. 2022	The program was announced to the students, and the selection and registration of the students were conducted.
Oct. 2022	Students started to prepare for the collaboration classes.
Nov. 2022	Three collaboration classes were conducted.
Dec. 2022	Evaluation and data collection were conducted.
Feb. 2022	The teacher presented the achievement at a symposium*

* All participating teachers presented their achievements in their SMILE projects there.

The topics of the three collaboration classes were: 1) Self-introduction; 2) Popular things in my country; and 3) My future dreams. Every collaboration class consisted of two sessions, each lasting for 25 minutes, and the group members for each session did not change throughout the three classes. Before each collaboration class, the students prepared their contents and questions and then discussed what they had prepared with their teacher through individual tutorials. Through their preparations and participation in the SMILE project, the students were expected to gain and improve in at least four points, each presented as Dimensions 1, 2, 3, and 4 below.²

Dimension 1: English Skills

Students develop their interactional skills. Language development takes time and energy and requires learners to stay motivated and control their behavior. This applies to all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and interacting. While the first four basic language skills might be developed without any peers, different conditions are needed to gain the last one, such as synthesizing these skills into Communicative Competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) in authentic situations and Interactional Competence (see Kecskés, 2019), which includes a speaker understanding the hearer's immediate reactions by reading their facial expressions, and the listener understanding the speaker's intention underlying their linguistic expression with support from gestures and facial expressions while reacting to what the speaker is conveying, etc. In other words, students must develop the ability to watch the group members closely and to identify, analyze, and synthesize new information to construct their knowledge base. For students to gain

Interactional Competence to process such complex and dynamic information, we must provide E-ACT opportunities.

It should be emphasized again that E-ACT requires an environment where English is necessary and functions as a means of communication. The SMILE project naturally supplies such situations. E-ACT is an enjoyable skill-building activity (see the Data section below).

Because the SMILE project sets up an environment in which students use English for real-time interactive communication, we expected them to gain Communicative Competence among second-language speakers of English and interactional competence in addition to the conventional four language skills mentioned above. Moreover, students enjoy using English to chat with their foreign peers. Because enjoyment is likely to accompany improved motivation, the more enjoyable the classes are, the more motivated students will be.

Dimension 2: Cultural Learning

Students experience a new culture and learn how to enjoy learning about it. Cultures are most clearly distinguished from other forms of social organization by the nature of their products. Cultural learning is a uniquely human form of social learning that allows for fidelity in transmitting behaviors and information among specific individuals, providing the psychological basis for cultural evolution (Tomasello et al., 1993). As such, experiencing cultural learning is extremely valuable for high school students. It typically occurs when a group of people who do not know one another carry out activities together; this is how a group of people within a society or culture tends to learn and pass on information, as it allows individuals to acquire skills they would be unable to develop independently throughout their lifetimes (van Schaik & Burkart, 2011). The SMILE project creates a basis where such learning takes place in school.

Dimension 3: ICT Skills

In the SMILE project, students gain and use ICT skills, which are crucial today. Proficiently utilizing ICT can help increase students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning goals (Christmann & Badgett, 2003), and the SMILE project extends such goals because they in fact use ICT to meet foreign peers. Moreover, as Ragoonaden and Bordeleau (2000) pointed out, from an educational perspective, the internet can radically change how learners assimilate information. As with interactional competence in English, some aspects of ICT skills can be gained only by using ICT tools. The SMILE project is one of the best forms for students to use and realize the potential of ICT.

Dimension 4: Collaborative Learning

Students learn how to collaborate equitably among participants. The SMILE project reported in this paper was conducted as an online collaborative learning course between Thai and Japanese students. Collaborative learning involves several students working together and sharing the workload equitably as they progress toward intended learning outcomes (Barkley et al., 2014, p. 4). This aspect of the SMILE project should be emphasized here.

The participants in the collaboration activities (i.e., the learners) work together to achieve the goal, which requires mutual understanding and appreciation of their counterpart students' contributions and their cultures. The goal differs from regular English classes, where teachers (i.e., the owners of the knowledge) pass the knowledge to the students (i.e., the receivers of the knowledge). The SMILE project is different from typical online conversation lessons, during which a native or near-native-speaker teacher talks with students; it is also different from collaborative activities between native and non-native speakers, during which the former is far better at using the target language, so the latter tend to think that they learn the target language from the former. In such a case, the former assumes authority in using the target language, and the latter may feel like accepting all the responsibility if communication breaks down, concluding that they are not proficient enough to express themselves or to understand what their peer means. This leads second-language learners to regard themselves as inferior to native speakers, which is far from an ideal consequence. Grouping learners with different first languages other than English, therefore, offers specific benefits to build communities among learners in which students scaffold for one another, and participants anticipate what the others want to convey to them.

The SMILE project requires participant collaboration and cooperation. The small-group communicative activities introduce the community to scaffolding, and the community's change process has a unique effect on participants' attitudes and motivation to use English by creating solidarity among the members of each group. The impact appears robust. We will present the data to support this observation in the following section.

Research Design

Research Question

The main research question in this study is whether the four dimensions described in the previous section or any other effects, in fact, arise

through the SMILE project for the students at a local Thai high school. The previous data in Pornthanachotanan et al. (2024) imply that the answer should be yes. Still, it is an open question whether this is the case with different teachers and students in another school, which is geographically and socially distinct.

It should be mentioned that the data in Pornthanachotanan et al. (2024) and those in this study were collected during the same academic year (AY2022), and so this study is not, in a precise sense, a replication of it. The current study is explorative as AY2022 was the first year the SMILE project was conducted with high schools in Thailand. However, whether expectations from the designers and instructors, described above as four dimensions of the SMILE project, are on the right track should be examined with another set of data.

Participants and Data Collection Methods

The participants included 12 students from Rattaphumwittaya School and the same number of students from Japan; the total number of students was 24. Thai students were in grades 10-12, and their English proficiency was A2 on the CEFR scale. Although additional students beyond the 12 Thai students had been interested in participating in this program, the first author selected 12 students in order to match the number of students from the Japanese side.

Table 2 provides the registration process on the Thai side. The participating students were selected through a registration questionnaire and a proficiency test that the first author produced. Japanese students were grade 10 students who studied in a Special Course called “Global Course” at a private high school in Chiba prefecture, near Metropolitan Tokyo. The whole class was involved from the Japanese side.

Table 2

The Registration Process at Rattaphumwittaya School in 2022

25 Sept. – 5 Oct.	The first author opened a call for participants in the SMILE project in class and conducted an online test to choose participants
6 Oct.	The dates of the collaboration classes were announced to the students.
7 Oct.	The students were given the selection results, and the participating students started preparing materials for the program.

10 Oct.	The students and their parents signed informed consent forms.
15, 21, 29 Nov.	Three collaboration classes were conducted.
2 Dec.	Quantitative and qualitative data were collected.

Data collection was conducted via quantitative and qualitative methods after the collaboration classes—an online questionnaire was administered to all 12 students, and an interview was conducted with four students who volunteered. As shown above in Table 1, these took place in December 2022, approximately one week after the third collaboration class.

Data

We collected data using both quantitative and qualitative methods at various points in the project, as described below.

Quantitative Data from the Questionnaire

First, we present the quantitative data based on an online questionnaire conducted after the last collaboration class. The questions and responses appear in Appendix A. The results show that the students experienced changes in their confidence in using English. Before participating in the first collaboration class, half of the respondents strongly agreed, the other half agreed, and no student disagreed with the statement that they were concerned about their ability to communicate in English (Question 1). This reveals that they felt they lacked confidence in their communication skills at that time. In contrast, all participants agreed that they came to realize that they were able to communicate in English after the collaboration classes; among them, 59% strongly agreed and the rest agreed (Question 2). Moreover, 75% strongly agreed that a collaboration class helped them to practice and enhance their English communication skills (Question 3): 75% is a very high ratio; the remaining 25% agreed, and none were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. These results show that students feel they experienced situations where their Interactional and Communicative Competence improved. So, it is safe to conclude that our prediction that Dimension 1 “English Skills” would improve through the SMILE project is supported from the students’ perspective.

While the figures concerning exchanging information and learning about one another’s cultures through the collaboration class were not as high as others, only one student was neutral, and the others agreed they learned about a new culture (Question 4). They were encouraged to talk about their own cultures, including their high-school student culture. They prepared for presenting them through individual tutorials, and they were happy to have presented what they had prepared. They were also happy to come to know

Japanese high school students' culture as well. The SMILE project had the effect we expected concerning Dimension 2: Cultural Learning.

The students established friendships through the collaboration classes. 67% strongly agreed that participating in a collaboration class can form strong relationships with peers (Question 5). Some students stayed in touch with one another (Question 6). This shows that “collaboration” took place, and the students established solidarity among the group peers. Therefore, it is safe to say that Dimension 4: Collaborative Learning took place here.³

Questions 7 and 8 concerned a hypothetical situation wherein another collaboration project was conducted. Eleven students agreed or strongly agreed, only one student was neutral, and none disagreed when asked whether they would recommend the collaboration class to their friends if another program were to be established (Question 7). Moreover, if they were given a chance to engage in the program again, they would be eager to do so (Question 8). This shows that they liked the SMILE project and that the course was highly successful. This goes along with Iio et al.'s (2023) report on the positive Net Promoter Scores among learners and teachers (N = 404) who participated in the SMILE projects in 2022.

We are aware that Q9— “According to your perspective, will you keep improving your English, and do you believe that knowing English is part of being successful and is half the way to having a brighter future?”—was not a good item because it included more than one proposition. Having said this, if their answer is positive, then they appear to agree with the two propositions. Therefore, the results are informative: All students either strongly agreed or agreed that students were willing to improve their English skills and that they felt English was an important tool in their lives.

Overall, results showed that no student disagreed or strongly disagreed with any questions⁴. This means that the SMILE project had a positive impact on the students. Although they were not confident before the course, they communicated with their Japanese peers in English and increased their confidence, exchanged cultural interests, made friends, became motivated to improve their English skills, and realized they had successfully communicated in English. The most satisfying result for the authors was that the students indicated they would participate in the SMILE project again and that they would also recommend it to their friends.

Qualitative Data from the Interview

In addition to the questionnaire described in the subsection above, qualitative data were collected with semi-structured interviews. This interview was intended to be exploratory and to supplement the quantitative data. The first author invited all four students who volunteered to participate in an

online interview. They were most enthusiastic in the preparatory tutorials and active in collaboration classes. The first author interviewed them individually, and the interview was video recorded. The data revealed some aspects that were not apparent from the quantitative data. Some examples of students' responses in the interview appear in Appendix B.

The questions used included the following:

- 1) Which skill did the collaboration classes help you improve most?
- 2) During the collaboration classes, how did you address the situation if you did not understand each other?
- 3) Apart from language acquisition and cultural awareness, were there any other skills you gained through this collaboration?
- 4) Did you enjoy engaging in this kind of project, and if given the opportunity, would you willingly participate in the program again?

Everyone expressed congruent perspectives. First, they unanimously agreed that their speaking and listening skills were the most prominent aspect they could enhance, as the collaboration classes required them to communicate in English. First, they became familiar with various accents: Japanese students spoke English with their accents, which was new to the Thai students. Note that this aspect of the learning experience cannot be obtained in online lessons with a (near-)native speaker. Communication with “foreign” accents is an aspect of E-ACT where English is used as a *lingua franca*.

Second, if they could not understand one another during the collaboration classes, they typically used gestures to describe what they wanted to convey. They also sometimes typed words into the Zoom chat, and if they still could not continue their conversation, they searched for relevant pictures and showed them to their buddies. This is an important aspect of using communicative strategies. These results show again that the students improved their Communicative Competence in the literal sense.

Third, the students also learned ICT and problem-solving skills in addition to language and culture. This was mentioned in the interview. They were unfamiliar with Zoom before joining the SMILE project because their school used Google Meet during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding their problem-solving skills, when confronted with internet connectivity issues, they learned to resolve these problems independently of the instructor and assistant teachers, and they sometimes used other SNSs as a bypass. The qualitative data, therefore, showed that the effect of the SMILE project on Dimension 3 described above (i.e., ICT Skills) was, in fact, observed. Fourth, all the students expressed in the interview great enjoyment of the program and a strong willingness to participate again if given the opportunity. This goes with the questionnaire answers to Questions 7 and 8 described in the previous subsection.

Lastly, we should mention that the only difficulty students encountered with collaboration was the technological instability of the internet. Sometimes, when they were talking with one another through the program, there would be a loss of internet connection, forcing them to stop and restart the program. No complaints or other problems were found in the interview. The students were happy to have been busy preparing for the collaboration classes and enjoyed themselves through the SMILE project.

Discussion

As shown in Table 3 in Appendix A, most students strongly agreed or agreed with all points in the questionnaire. This collaboration class, therefore, provided a valuable platform for students to practice English, exchange cultural knowledge, and establish international friendships. Even though some respondents initially expressed concerns about their ability to communicate with interlocutors effectively, they gained confidence through the three collaboration classes and realized they possessed the necessary skills to converse in an E-ACT situation during and after participating in the program. Note that raising confidence is a crucial issue in foreign-language education (see Elahi Shirvan, et al. 2024, Zhang et al. 2024), and experiencing communication and collaboration is the best way, or one of the best possible ways, to gain it.

In addition to their English skills, the students appeared to become better and more effective at working on the materials they would use in the upcoming collaboration classes. They were also able to reflect better and more deeply on what they did in the previous classes. The series of tutorials likely facilitated students' growth through the SMILE project.

Besides the change in such skills, the learners also developed their metacognitive awareness. The students appeared to have realized that they lacked opportunities to use English in their daily lives as a result of experiencing E-ACT. This realization was likely to lead them to become more motivated to work on communication tasks in their regular classroom. In other words, it is plausible that experiencing the SMILE project will likely have a long-term effect on learners' attitudes toward their Willingness to Communicate in the classroom with students (cf. MacIntyre et al., 1998), even when they share their first language, once they notice how important and enjoyable it is to talk in English.

The effect is not likely to be limited to their behavior in the classroom. As mentioned in the Introduction of this paper, learners appeared to be unaware that there were many opportunities for getting English input on the internet. Now that they have realized they need to seek out opportunities to use English, we expect them to access English on the internet more actively.

Also, it is natural that, because they lacked confidence, they did not make any output or interact in English on the internet. Getting confidence and finding that they can utilize E-ACT skills may also change their internet activities.

The data also revealed that students developed strong relationships with their peers and stayed in touch beyond the scheduled program sessions. If students communicate with foreign peers outside the class, such additional “collaboration” not only affords them additional opportunities to practice their language skills and exchange ideas but also allows students to know one another more deeply, which may ultimately lead to a more peaceful and faithful society.

The most important point we should mention here is that the primary and secondary goals of English language learning in students’ lives may have changed. Students may have realized that communicating in English (or in a foreign language) with those they cannot otherwise communicate with is great fun. Like almost all high school students in Thailand and other countries where English is a foreign language, participating students may have studied English primarily to gain knowledge and skills in English in order to get good marks in examinations. Even though they enjoyed using English, such an aspect, i.e., enjoying themselves using English, is no more than a secondary reason. The SMILE project may have altered these goals and aims.

If this is the case, we teachers and educators must step back and consider the primary purpose of foreign language education in general. If education should improve students’ well-being and let them lead happy lives in high school and the future, then providing them with such E-ACT situations may be a kind of duty of our institutions and teachers.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion and our interpretation of these findings, we found that collaboration classes through the internet positively affected students, strengthened students’ confidence to communicate in English, and broadened their knowledge about foreign cultures. In short, online collaboration classes among second language learners of English are an effective method to improve learners’ confidence and attitudes, as well as their evaluation of their own English-speaking abilities. Finally, we again emphasize that the positive impact of online collaboration classes will make students more receptive and motivated to study English.

Many of the issues raised here deserve to be investigated in future studies. The main shortcomings of this study are that the data were collected mainly retrospectively after the project, and that they are all students’ responses to either an online questionnaire or an interview. Collecting behavioral data during the project would reveal other aspects of the SMILE project. Since what is reported here is based on the first author’s initial

involvement in the project, additional interesting findings will certainly follow from further achievements.

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. This project was supported by Rattaphumwittaya School and Ichihara Chuo High School. We sincerely thank the school administrators, teachers, and students for their support and participation. Special thanks go to Yuichi Kijima, Ichihara Chou High School, and Junji Sakurai, WILL, for their kind collaboration through the SMILE Project. We also thank John Matthews for his valuable comments on the contents and English of the paper, and Tokitada Hangai for his bibliographical work. We thank two anonymous LEARN reviewers for their insightful comments. 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

Muhammadheesam Mayuroh: A full-time English teacher at Rattaphumwittaya School, Songkhla, under the Secondary Educational Service Area Office Songkhla–Satun, Thailand. His academic interests include communication development and innovative English language instruction.

Shigenori Wakabayashi: A professor of Applied Linguistics, Chuo University, Japan, and Representative Director of 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.

Endnotes

¹ We should point out here that the situation is the same in the Japanese counterpart school. Students spend most of the time at school, home, and

sometimes at a cramming school. Of course, they spend some (or a lot of) time in the virtual world, but they are unlikely to encounter the opportunity to use English as they do in the SMILE project.

² Wakabayashi and Iio (2024) indicate four unique points of the SMILE project from different perspectives, namely, i) The topics of the collaboration classes are usually about the participating students and the same groups meet three times so that they come to know each other very well through the project; ii) the small-group activities with four-to-five students lead the students to not only to know the difference between students from their country and those from a foreign one, but also to realize differences among the foreign students. In other words, the students meet “individual” foreign students, and the project provides participants with a personalized experience that cannot be gained in larger group activities; iii) students become interdependent with the group members and establish solidarity among themselves. This is apparent when they have problems with their devices and try to help each other to exchange information, such as using gestures and chat function; and iv) Dialogbook, an original Learning Management System application developed by Jun Iio, connects participating schools, making it easy to conduct the SMILE project and collect data. This online application was not used as much in the current study as in other SMILE projects, so it is not described here.

³ A reviewer suggested that the data could be discussed regarding the socio-cultural theory (SCT), especially the Zone of Proximal Development (see Swain et al. 2015: ZPD) and scaffolding. We agree with this suggestion, but to carry out such a study, we need a more scrutinized analysis of participants’ interactions in each collaboration group to provide data for their estimation of ZPD and implementation of scaffolding into their conversation. This line of study differs from the current paper and must be left for another study.

⁴ This may be a problem with the Questionnaire, since a response bias may be obscuring the findings. Ideally, there would be questions for people to clearly disagree with and others for them to clearly agree with. That way, there would be no question that participants would be willing to use the (full) range of the scale. We thank John Matthews for pointing this out.

References

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K. P. (2014). *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/i.1.1>
- Christmann, E. P., & Badgett, J. L. (2003). A meta-analytic comparison of the effects of computer-assisted instruction on elementary students' academic achievement. *Information Technology in Childhood Education Annual*, 1, 91-104.
- Daraha, K. (2013). The effect of internet use on high school students in Pattani Province. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 91, 241-256. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.422>
- Elahi Shirvan, M., Saeedy Robot, E., Alamer, A., Lou, L. M., & Barabadi, E. (2024). A multilevel meta-analysis of language mindsets and language learning outcomes in second language acquisition research. *Educational Psychology Review*, 36(15). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-024-09849-2>
- Gokhale, A. A. (1995). Collaborative learning enhances critical thinking. *Journal of Technology Education*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.21061/jte.v7i1.a.2>
- Iio, J., Miyamoto, Y., & Wakabayashi, S. (2023). Lessons learned from intercultural communication classes of the SMILE Project. In R. J. Dickey & H.K. Lee (Eds.), *AsiaTEFL Proceedings 2023: Papers from the 21st AsiaTEFL Conference* (pp. 1021 –1033). AsiaTEFL.
- Iio, J., Wakabayashi, S., Sakurai, J., Ishikawa, S., & Kijima, Y. (2021). Providing a platform for intercultural communication education and its practices. *Transactional Digital Practice*, 2, 58-67. <https://www.ipsj.or.jp/dp/contents/publication/47/TR0203-06.html>
- Keckés, I. (2019). *English as a lingua franca: The pragmatic perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- 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>
- Oranpattanachai, P. (2013). Motivation and English language achievement of Thai undergraduate students. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 6(1), 26-48.
- Pornthanachotanan, P., Wakabayashi, S., Iio, J., Sakurai, J., Honda, Y., Insawart, 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. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/LEARN/article/view/270438>.
- Ragoonaden, K., & Bordeleau, P. (2000). Collaborative learning via the Internet. *Educational Technology & Society*, 3(3), 361-372.

- Swain, M., Kinnear, P., & Steinman, L. (2015). *Sociocultural theory in second language education: An introduction through narratives* (2nd ed.). MM Textbooks.
- Tomasello, M., Kruger, A. C., & Ratner, H. H. (1993). Cultural learning. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *16*(3), 495-511.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x0003123x>
- van Schaik, C. P., & Burkart, J. M. (2011). Social learning and evolution: The cultural intelligence hypothesis. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, *366*(1567), 1008-1016.
<https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2010.0304>
- Wakabayashi, S., & Iio, J. (2024). The students meet internationally through language education (SMILE) Project: Its overview and unique points. *LEI-Con: Language Education International Conference*, *4*(1), 187-194.
- 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: IFIP World Conference on Computers in Education, WCCE 2022, Hiroshima, Japan, August 20–24, 2022*, Revised Selected Papers (pp. 261–274). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-43393-1_24
- Zhang, Q., Song, Y., & Zhao, C. (2024). Foreign language enjoyment and willingness to communicate: The mediating roles of communication confidence and motivation. *System*, *125*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103346>

Appendix A

Quantitative Data Collection

Table 3 shows the questions and responses used for the quantitative data collection.

Table 3

Questions and the numbers (and ratios) of responses

Questions	*SA	S	N	D	SD
Q1 Were you concerned about whether you could communicate in English before participating in the program?	6 (50%)	2 (17%)	3 (25%)	0	0
Q2 After the program, do you realize you can communicate in English, even though you cannot do so daily?	7 (59%)	5 (42%)	0	0	0

Q3	In your perspective, are collaboration classes a practical way to practice English communication?	9 (75%)	3 (25%)	0	0	0
Q4	Through the collaboration classes, were you able to learn about and exchange cultures with each other?	7 (59%)	4 (34%)	1 (9%)	0	0
Q5	By participating in the collaboration classes, did you have a chance to build a good relationship with your buddies?	8 (67%)	4 (34%)	0	0	0
Q6	Do you keep in contact with one another besides the program running in class each week?	8 (67%)	2 (17%)	2 (17%)	0	0
Q7	Would you suggest this course to your friends if other collaboration classes are being held?	8 (67%)	3 (25%)	1 (9%)	0	0
Q8	If you have another opportunity, will you join the program again?	10 (84%)	1 (9%)	1 (9%)	0	0
Q9	From your perspective, will you keep improving your English, and do you believe that knowing English is part of being successful and is half the way to have a brighter future?	8 (67%)	4 (34%)	0	0	0

Note. *SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, N: Neutral, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree
Those irrelevant to the discussion in this study have been omitted.

Appendix B

Examples of what students said in the interview are as follows:

- We found collaboration classes through the internet help us improve our English skills, especially speaking.
- Through the collaboration classes help us get familiar with variety of English accents and we feel that we stay in the environment of English vibes since both of us speak different first language.
- We have learnt problem solving skill through the collaboration classes.
- We sometimes used body language, typing, and pictures instead of speaking if we could not understand each other.
- We also learned cultures and ICT skills. We noticed how different the educational systems of both countries were.
- We very enjoyed with the program and if we have another chance to participate in the program, we will be willing to join.