

Online Collaboration Classes Among Learners of Japanese with Different Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds

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要約

本論文では、タイと中国の大学間で行われた一連のオンライングループ活動プロジェクトを例に、日本語をコミュニケーション手段として用いた同時双方向型の国際共同教育プロジェクトの実施例と、参加者による自己評価およびコース評価を紹介します。前半では、このプロジェクトの準備、実施、振り返り、他校との情報共有、プロジェクト実施に向けた運営手順など、実践的な側面について詳細に説明します。これにより、聴衆にプロジェクト運営の全体像を理解してもらうことを目指しています。後半では、学習者のプロジェクト参加に対する動機、期待、自己評価（成果や日本語能力、コース評価）について報告し、議論します。データは、Google フォームや複数の機関間でのコラボレーションを目的に新たに開発されたオンラインアプリケーション「Dialogbook」を通じて収集されました。その結果、参加者の全体的な満足度や学習意欲の向上が示されました。

キーワード: ICT、国際オンラインコラボレーション、期待、楽しさ、動機

Abstrak

Makalah ini memperkenalkan sebuah proyek dengan serangkaian kegiatan kelompok online antara universitas Thailand dan Cina sebagai contoh proyek pengajaran kolaboratif internasional interaktif secara simultan menggunakan bahasa Jepang sebagai alat komunikasi dan evaluasi peserta terhadap diri mereka sendiri dan kursus. Pada paruh pertama, aspek-aspek praktis dari proyek ini, termasuk persiapan, implementasi, refleksi, berbagi informasi dengan sekolah lain, dan prosedur manajemen untuk melaksanakan proyek ini, akan dirinci. Hal ini akan memberikan pemahaman yang komprehensif kepada para peserta mengenai operasional proyek. Pada paruh kedua, kami akan melaporkan dan mendiskusikan motivasi peserta didik untuk bergabung dalam proyek ini, harapan, dan evaluasi mereka terhadap pencapaian mereka sendiri, keterampilan bahasa Jepang, dan kursus. Data dikumpulkan selama proyek berlangsung dengan menggunakan Google Formulir dan Dialogbook, sebuah aplikasi online yang baru dikembangkan untuk kolaborasi antara dua atau lebih lembaga. Data tersebut menunjukkan kepuasan peserta secara keseluruhan dan peningkatan motivasi.

Kata Kunci: TIK, kolaborasi online internasional, harapan, kesenangan, motivasi

1. Introduction

The online conference system became accessible to nonspecialists of ICT, especially during COVID-19, and its utilization for language education has been practiced in many ways. One of them is to conduct collaboration classes among L2 learners of a target language without sharing their first languages. Wakabayashi et al. (2023) report a collaboration course between Japanese and Malaysian universities, Iio et al. (2024) report one between Japanese and Thai universities, and Pornthanachotanan et al. (2024) report another between Japanese and Thai high schools. These reports all show the increase in students' confidence and enhancement of their motivation for studying a second language, but the target language of all these studies was English, a practical lingua franca in the current era. Whether the same results are available from the same type of collaboration classes in Japanese, which is a minor language compared with English, is our question. Baba et al. (2024) is the only study, as far as we are aware, that reports an international collaboration class between learners of Japanese as a second language. Baba et al. focus on some other aspects of learner behavior such as learner strategies used when they could not have conveyed what they wanted to than what we describe in this paper in the same course we present here.

This collaboration course is one of the Students Meet Internationally through Language Education: SMILE) projects, which have been conducted since 2020, led by the first two authors of this paper. The number of participants in this project was more than 1,000 during the FY 2023, but all projects were conducted in English, except the one in this article. The third author joined this project in 2023 with the volunteer students from her Japanese classes, and this was the first SMILE project in Japanese. To set up such a class is based on the human network and management system provided by the Workshop Initiatives for Language Learning (WILL), whose English website is < <https://kotoba-kobo.jp/en/top-2/>>.

This paper is structured as follows: In section 2, we will describe the general framework of the collaboration course. In section 3, the methods and procedures of data collection will be given. Since an online application, Dialogbook, developed for the SMILE project by the second author of this paper was used, we will describe its functions in some detail. The data from the questionnaires before and after the whole course will be presented in section 4, and those after each preparatory and collaboration class collected with Dialogbook in section 5. In section 6, we will discuss specific aspects evoked from the data in the previous sections. Conclusions will be given in the last section.

2. The Framework of the SMILE project

Figure 1 shows a scene in an online collaboration class in the SMILE project. A typical group activity in this collaboration class involves three to five students from two countries where the target language is taught in a classroom.

The participating students do not share their first language or official languages for daily communication, and they learn the same target language in class in different cultural situations. Therefore, it is natural and authentic for them to use the target language in such a situation. We regard this as the case for utilizing the target language for genuine communication. Another important condition for the SMILE project is that participants are of the same generation. Junior high school students meet junior high students; Senior high school students meet senior high school students; and University students meet university students. The same generation shares the same (kinds of) interests in their lives. From our experience, we feel the cultural “gap” is rather thin among learners even though they live in different countries in East and Southeast Asia. At least this gap, especially regarding the topics they want to exchange and share their interests online, is much smaller than those between students and adult teachers, even though they spend a lot of time in one classroom in

the same country every day.



Figure 1. A scene in a collaboration class (cited from Wakabayashi et al. (2023)).

The core of the SMILE project is for students to be involved in small group online communication, taking place three or four times. The number of this activity is set as such mainly for the following three reasons: First, the practicality of implementing this course at schools, i.e., if too many classes are set, other activities may be affected, and consequently, this type of new course may not be welcomed by some teachers. Second, on the other hand, students need to meet more than once to behave without too much tension to become friendly peers and share personal interests. Learners’ development as a group, whether linguistically or psychologically, takes place consecutively. Third, the last and important reason is another practical issue: the Internet is unstable in some situations. Sometimes, students fail to access a site where conference meetings should occur. From our experience, three classes must be set to ensure every participant student has at least one session for online group activity. In fact, in the course we will describe, a few students talked with their peers in another country online only in the last collaboration class because of a bad internet connection.

Table 1. The plan of the course (Thailand side)

	Preparatory Classes			Online Collaboration Class						Wrap-up and review
	11 th Oct	25 th Oct		1 st Nov		15 th Nov		22 nd Nov		22 th Nov**
Time for Questionnaire* on Dialogbook	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	N/A
Number of participants	17	14		12		13		11		11
Contents	Instruction: how to prepare the contents; and how to use ICT tools	Meet and greet with the partner class in one online meeting room		1 st Group discussion: Self-introduction		2 nd Group discussion: College Cultures		3 rd Group discussion: My dream and future		Review the achievement in the whole course

NB *The responses to the questionnaires are discussed in Section 5. **This was different from the original plan. See below.

Table 1 illustrates the Thailand-China SMILE project, including both preparatory and online collaboration classes. Collaboration activities (i.e., group discussions) were conducted for 40 minutes from 17:20 to 18:00. This was framed within a time slot from 16:40 to 18:30 in Thailand (from 17:40 to 19:30 in China) after the regular classes. The students were volunteers from the Japanese courses the last author taught and a few who studied it in another class. Their proficiency in Japanese was A2 in CEFR. The participants from Thailand and Chinese universities were 19 and 14 university students who majored in Japanese. Some missed the classes, and the actual number of participants in each class is given in Table 1.

As mentioned above, the internet was unreliable in this specific Thailand-China collaboration course. Among seven groups for online activity, only two groups were connected online in the first collaboration class. In the second class, the situation was even worse: Only one group was successfully connected at the beginning. Later in the same class, the grouping was changed and Breakout Room was used so that all students met their Chinese peers in small groups. In the third class, all Thai groups successfully connected with Chinese groups in pairs. It was a great relief for teachers to see that all students had at least one opportunity to conduct the online small group communication. The unreliable connection may be due to the internet situation specific to China, but it is worth setting at least three collaboration classes as mentioned above.

Some school restrictions also forced a change to the course plan. It had been planned to have an additional class on the Thai side for wrap-up after the last collaboration class in the following week, but the university restricted access to the classroom in the evening, so the wrap-up was conducted after the third class on the same evening for thirty minutes.

3. Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in two ways, both of which were done on the Thai side only. We report these data in this paper.

Google Forms were used in one way. Two questionnaires were conducted before and after the whole project. Sixteen and 13 participants answered the pre-project and post-project questionnaires, respectively. The questions and answers will be given in the next section.

In addition, students responded to questions in the Dialogbook at the beginning and the end of each class. Dialogbook is an application developed by the second author of this paper (see Iio and Wakabayashi (2020) for a more detailed description of this application). Figure 2 is the front webpage for a student participant. The left column (My Comments) is for teacher-student correspondence. At the beginning and the end of each class, students sent their comments on the class to the teacher, and the teacher replied. The data of correspondence is not discussed in this paper. The middle column, “Next Meeting,” is used to share the URLs among the participant students and teachers. The right column is used for the questionnaires, the data from which will be discussed in section 5. Here you read 11 lines in Japanese, which are the titles of the list of questions. When you click one of the titles, you will see the questions. Figure 3 shows the screen when the first one しつもん (question) was clicked. The two questions were given here. Students answered them by selecting one choice among 0, 1, 2, and 3 (the minimum (Lv. 0) and the maximum (Lv. 3)). The questions were set by the teacher of the class (the third author) and nine sets of questions were given before and after the classes. The questions will be discussed in section 5.

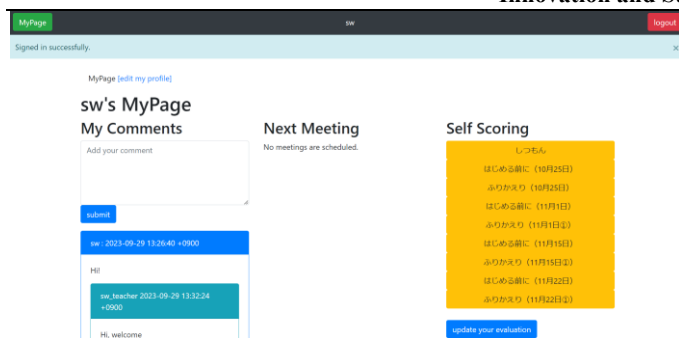


Figure 2. The first page of Dialogbook



Figure 3. The rubrics in Dialogbook

4. Results 1: Questions in Google Forms

During the second preparatory class, a questionnaire was conducted to investigate the students' reasons for joining this project and their expectations. Table 2 shows the two questions, the choices, and the number of students who selected each choice. Some other questions concerning participants' learning backgrounds, etc., were also asked.

Table 2. The Questionnaire before the class

Questions	Choices (one or more can be selected)	No. of students
I. Why do you participate in this course?	I want to become better at Japanese	16
	I can talk with people in a foreign country	12
	I can talk with those who major in Japanese	6
	This course looks fun	5
	Others	3
II. What do you expect to do in this collaboration?	To know about students of Japanese in a foreign country	14
	To know about the Japanese language and Japan	12
	To know China	10
	To know other persons	8
	To have myself known to other persons	5
	To have Thailand known	4
	Others	1

The students' responses to the first Question, “Why do you participate in this course?” show that all students wanted to improve their proficiency in Japanese. This is natural and reasonable. The students seemed aware that they needed chances to interact in Japanese. Most of them were also interested in talking with people in a foreign country, probably because they were interested in talking with those with different cultural backgrounds or just meeting with strangers of the same generation. These answers show that students are interested in improving their language skills, gaining knowledge of different cultures, and/or expanding their social networks.

The answers to the second question concerning their expectation show that all, except one, would like to know about students of Japanese in a foreign country. The eagerness to know those in the same generation motivated these students to join the course. We regard this curiosity for knowing people as a healthy attitude toward society, which should be fostered to grow in foreign language classrooms. Interestingly, eight out of 11 participants chose “To know about the Japanese language and Japan” even though they knew that their partner

students were Chinese, not Japanese. This may show that learners were aware that learners in a different country might know some issues that they did not know about the Japanese language and Japan, even though these students might be neither more proficient in Japanese nor knowledgeable of Japanese culture. Over half of the participants answered they wanted to know about China. So, Thai participants might have felt that China was closer to Japan than Thailand. On the other hand, only four or three participants were keen on having themselves or their country known to foreign students. This contrast shows that students were eager to gain something rather than provide or show off what they had.

Table 3. The Questionnaire after the class

Questions	Choices	No. of responses
How did you find the course? (Multiple choice was allowed.)	It was a good opportunity to use Japanese.	12
	I enjoyed myself.	9
	My Japanese improved.	7
	I experienced talking with the students of Japanese in a foreign country	7
	I want to talk more in Japanese	7
	I want to study Japanese more	6
	I want to be better at Japanese	6
	I made Chinese friends	4
	I got knowledge of Chiha	4
	I gained confidence in speaking Japanese	3
	I had myself known to my partners	3
	I wanted to talk more	2
	I introduced Thailand to my partners	2
	My knowledge of. IT increased	2
	I made Thai friends	1
	My knowledge of Japan increased	1
	My interest in China increased	1
	I preferred a different topic	1
	It was boring	0
	I lost my confidence in using Japanese	0
I knew more about Thailand	0	
I did not get anything new	0	
I found a new thing	0	
Others	0	
How did this collaboration course change your motivation for studying Japanese?	I became much more eager to study Japanese than before.	7
	I became more eager to study Japanese than before.	6
	No change.	0
	I became less eager to study Japanese than before.	0
	I became much less eager to study Japanese than before.	0
Will you join a (similar) collaboration class again?	Yes	13
	No	0
	I don't know	0

After the three collaboration classes, another questionnaire was conducted. Thirteen students voluntarily answered it. The results are shown in Table 3. To the first question, “How did you find the course?” all except one found that the course was a good opportunity to use Japanese. Most (9 out of 13) answered that they enjoyed themselves. More than half felt their proficiency in Japanese improved, and they wanted to study Japanese more. On the other hand, only a few said that their knowledge of China, Japan, or IT increased. These responses suggest that the collaboration class was effective in skill acquisition and increasing motivation but did not have so much effect on knowledge expansion. It is good to know no

participants selected any negative statements such as “It was boring” or “I lost my confidence in using Japanese.” About the change in motivation to study Japanese, all students selected either “I became a lot more eager to study Japanese than before” or “I became more eager to study Japanese than before.” This also reflects an increase in motivation. The last question was whether they wanted to join if a collaborative course like the current one was conducted next term, to which all students answered “Yes.”

5. Results 2: Questions in Dialogbook

Let us examine the participants’ responses to the questions in Dialogbook. The figures in the Time column in Table 4 below correspond with the ones in Table 1 in Section 2, which show the Time when each questionnaire was conducted. Using Dialogbook, the teacher gave the students a list of questions nine times (see the rightmost column in Figure 2); each list had two to five questions. Participants chose one of the four scales, from Level 0 (minimal) to Level 3 (maximum).

Table 4. Questions and responses to the questions at the beginning and end in each class

Questions	Time	P1	P2	P3	P4	P4	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	AVE
A. Are you looking forward to this exchange program?	1	3	3		3	3	3			3	3	3.00
B. Are you looking forward to meeting Chinese students?	1	2	3		3	3	3			3	3	2.86
C. Are you looking forward /excited about the collaboration class?	2		3	3	3	3	3	3		3	3	3.00
	4	2	2	3			3	3	2		3	2.57
	6	2	3	2		2	3	3	3			2.57
D. Did you enjoy the class?	8	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3		3.00
	3	1		2	2	2	3	3		3	3	2.38
	7	2	3	2		3	3	3	3	3	3	2.78
E. Are you looking forward /excited about the next collaboration class?	9	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3		3.00
	3	2		3	3	3	3	3		3	3	2.88
F. Did you make yourself understood in Japanese?	7	3	2	1		3	2	3	3	3	3	2.56
	9	1	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3		2.56
G. Did you understand other participants’ utterances?	7	2	2	2		3	3	3	3	3	3	2.67
	9	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3		2.78
H. Did you like the topic (self-introduction and student life)?	7	2	2	2		3	3	3	3	3	3	2.67
I. Did you like the topic (my dream)	9	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3		2.78
J. Did you prepare for the self-introduction?	2		2	1	2	2	1	2		3	3	2.00
K. Did you prepare for the class?	4	0	0	3			3	2	2		3	1.86
	6	0	1	2		1	3	3	3			1.86
	8	0	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	3		1.78
Average		1.8	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.6	2.8	2.8	2.9	3	3	2.56

The first questionnaire (Time 1) was given during the first preparatory class. Other questionnaires with odd numbers (Time 2–10) were given and answered before or at the beginning of the class, and those with even numbers after the class. From P1 (Participant 1) to P10 are individual participants. The questions were all given in Japanese (and translated

into English by the first author of this paper). Not all participants answered all questions because all the activities, including answering these questions, were voluntary, so the results given below are no more than illustrative, yet some interesting results emerged.

In the analysis, we excluded the participants who responded to fewer than half of the questions because their responses were difficult to interpret. The number of participants examined was 10. We also excluded the questions to which fewer than half of these ten participants responded. They were the questions at Time 5, given after the first collaboration class, when only one group successfully conducted the online interaction.

Questions A and B in Table 4 were given in the first preparatory class. All students were highly excited about the collaboration class, and all but one (P1) were about meeting Chinese students in the collaboration. A similar question (Question C) was given before the second preparatory class and each collaboration class. All participants answered 3 at the beginning of the second preparatory class (Time 2) and of the last collaboration class (Time 8). Before the first and second collaboration classes, three answered 2. This may reflect some learners' emotional or preparatory conditions, which we will discuss in the next section. Here, the average 2.57 out of 3 (Times 4 and 6 to Question D) is very high. Therefore, we can conclude that the students were looking forward to collaboration classes in general.

Question D: “Did you enjoy the class?” was given after each class. Most students always chose 3, and even those who did not answer 3 in the first or second collaboration class chose 3 after the last collaboration class. This certainly reflects that ALL students enjoyed the collaboration activities increasingly toward the end of the course. The maximum positive evaluation of the third collaboration class is likely to reflect the situation that the internet connection was good enough for all participants to conduct small group activities in the last collaboration class. In short, all students enjoyed the online collaboration classes. Note also that the question after the first class (Time 5) is missing because the number of students who responded to this question was smaller than half due to the situation that only a few students conducted the collaboration activity.

Question E: “Are you looking forward /excited about the next collaboration class?” was asked after the second preparatory class (Time 3) and first and second collaboration classes (Times 5 and 7). Data from Time 5 is not discussed here because the number of answers was smaller than half. The data from Times 3 and 7 show that all students except one each (P1 at Time 3 and P2 at Time 7) were looking forward to the next collaboration classes very much. Note that P2 answered she/he enjoyed the second collaboration class (3 for Question D at Time 7). We do not know why she/he enjoyed the class but was not excited about the third collaboration class very much. Instead, she/he selected 2, the second highest among the four scales. In short, all participants clearly enjoyed the collaboration classes through the three collaboration classes.

Question F: “Did you make yourself understood in Japanese?” and Question G: “Did you understand other participants' utterances?” were given after each collaboration class. Here again, we do not report the results at Time 5. The answers at Times 7 and 9 are high. Five participants selected 3 for this question all the time, and all the rest, except P4, who did not answer the questions at Time 7, showed that they evaluated their comprehension ability (Question G) higher than their production one (Question F). This asymmetry appears natural. The students have more chances to listen than to speak in the regular classes, which might have been reflected in their evaluation of the two skills.

Questions H and I asked whether the students liked the topics. P1, 2, and 3 were the only ones who did not choose 3 for these questions. They were, in fact, the ones who gave the lowest evaluations to the whole set of questions on average. Therefore, we may infer that because they were not very happy with the topics, they did not give high evaluations to the

other questions as well.

Questions J and K asked whether students were prepared for the collaboration classes. In the first preparatory class, the instructor (the third author) instructed them to start preparing for the self-introduction, the topic of the first collaboration class, and Question J: “Did you prepare for the self-introduction?” was given at the beginning of the second preparatory class. Question K “Did you prepare for the class?” was given before the collaboration activities. To this question, P9 and P10 always chose 3, which indicates their positive attitude and readiness through three collaboration classes. These students enjoyed the whole course because they responded 3 to all the questions. P1, on the other hand, did not respond to this question (or to Question C given at Time 2). Note that it was only this student who chose 2 for Question A: “Are you looking forward to meeting Chinese students?”. His/her choice of 2 was certainly not low if we consider the range of choices (from 0 to 3), but it should be safe to say this participant responded differently from the other members. His/her answer to Question K: “Did you prepare for the class?” was 0, which is exceptional. As shown in Table 2, the lower the points they chose for Question K, the lower the average of their choices. It would be reasonable to conclude that those who said they had prepared for the collaboration classes tended to choose 3 (the highest level) in other questions.

Overall scores in Table 2 show that almost all students evaluated the collaboration classes as enjoyable and achievable with their Japanese skills. The average of all scores was 2.56, in the range from 0 to 3. This is very high. In short, the course was beneficial to them.

6. Discussion

First, let us compare the differences between what participants expected, shown in Table 2, and what they gained, shown in Table 3. Sixteen (out of 16) students said they wanted to improve in Japanese, and 12 said they joined the program because they wanted to talk with people in a foreign country. These goals have been achieved considering 12 students answered that this collaboration program was a good opportunity to use Japanese and seven answered their Japanese improved. In addition, seven evaluated their experience in talking with Chinese students of Japanese as valuable.

On the other hand, although 10 students expected to know about China, these expectations were fulfilled only partially: The number of participants who answered that they made Chinese friends and that of those who said that they gained knowledge of China were both four, which is less than half. This is probably because the online discussion was successfully conducted fewer times than they had expected. However, this situation did not disappoint these students too much: Nine students reported that they enjoyed themselves in the Google Forms (and everyone selected 3 (maximum) to Question D after the last class on Dialogbook).

The last important finding in this study is that this collaboration course motivated students to study Japanese further. Seven students reported that they had wanted to talk more in Japanese, six said they wanted to study Japanese more, and six said they wanted to be better at Japanese. We suggest that this collaboration project may have allowed them to realize the gap between the idealized self and the real self. What is good is that they positively utilized this realization and got motivated to further study.

Our report in this paper is surely preliminary as an academic study, and we are aware that a more elaborated questionnaire is required for the evaluation of a language course for research purposes. Yet, we found at least three important points in the Google Forms questionnaire as mentioned above: i) The participant students felt that they had improved in language and ICT skills; ii) they had not expanded their knowledge of culture as much as expected; iii) yet they got motivated to further study Japanese and would like to join a course

like this one.

Lastly, let us examine the data from the questions after each class collected with Dialogbook once again. The results given in the last section are self-explanatory for each question. Here, we should mention two points: The first point is the most important and fascinating. The responses to Question D “Did you enjoy the class?” were increased during the course. This question was asked three times: Times 3 (after the second preparatory class), 7 (after the second collaboration class), and 9 (after the third/last collaboration class). Although it is a pity that we failed to collect enough responses at Time 5 (after the first collaboration class), it is clear that all but one (P1) enjoyed this course from the start of the course toward the end, and their enjoyment increased: The averages were 2.38 at Time 3, 2.78 at Time 7, and 3.00 at Time 9. All participants selected the highest choice at the end of the course. The second important point is that the low-level responses (0 or 1) were from a very limited number of participants and to specific questions. That is, the responses as 0 were exclusively given by two participants (P1 and P2) or those to Question K: “Did you prepare for the class?”. The responses as 1 were observed either among these two participants and P3 or to Question K or Question J: “Did you prepare for the self-introduction?”. In short, the rest of the participants (i.e., P4-10) selected 2 or 3 for all the questions except the questions about the preparation (see Table 4). This shows that the participants’ evaluation of the course and themselves was very high in all aspects with only a few exceptions. In short, this SMILE project was highly successful, and the students were satisfied with its contents and themselves.

As far as we know, there is no previous report on a series of collaboration classes in which Japanese was used as a foreign language for communication by learners with different first languages, except Baba et al. (2024). Therefore, we cannot decide whether this achievement should be attributed to the general nature of international collaboration courses or some aspect of this specific course. However, previous reports on the SMILE projects where English was used as a communication tool show no evidence that participants’ enjoyment or satisfaction is attributable to the English language (see Iio et al., 2020, 2023; Pornthanachotanan et al., 2024; Wakabayashi et al., 2023). They all report that students enjoyed themselves talking with foreign peers in a foreign language, but no study mentions that English has a value higher than any other language for this kind of collaboration class. The SMILE project, as its name implies, has successfully provided the students with happy and exciting times. Students show big smiles in all studies.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we described the framework of the SMILE project, including the newly developed online application Dialogbook. We also reported how data was collected with Google Forms and Dialogbook. The data collected before, during, and after the SMILE project between Thai and Chinese Universities, where Japanese was used as the means of communication, showed that the international online collaboration course was highly successful. Considering that participating students showed high satisfaction despite the Internet being unreliable in this collaboration project, we expect even better evaluations if we had more stability in the Internet connection. Further studies are certainly needed, but we are sure that using Japanese as an authentic communication tool should provide learners with opportunities where they enjoy themselves as a language user. The participants appreciate language learning as fun, which cheers them up.

8. References

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