Collaborating on Cross-Cultural Connections: Promise, Pitfalls, and Cosmopolitan Potential

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Cross-cultural connections between classrooms can be rewarding and motivating; indeed, they have the potential to help cultivate open, reflective, responsive dispositions in students as the participants encounter a variety of perspectives and practice authentic communication across difference. It can thus be quite beneficial for educators to team up with global peers to create a cosmopolitan community where their students can interact with each other – but this process is not always as straightforward or simple as it might seem. Having collaborated with educators around the world on cross-cultural exchanges, I explore in this paper my own experiences: the highlights and benefits as well as the difficulties and disappointments. I seek to better understand the factors that facilitated or hindered these exchanges, with the ultimate aim of offering practical insights to practitioners interested in collaborating on exchanges and providing an enjoyable, positive, uplifting experience for everyone.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of my nearly two decades in Korea, I've experienced countless gaps in communication. From misunderstandings about the nuance and intention of a question to differing conceptualizations of what a particular word – even an ostensibly shared word such as *notebook* – means, to different ways of valuing built into the language itself (e.g., "Work hard!" in Korea compared to "Take it easy!" or a sarcastic "Have fun!" in the U.S.), my life here has been rife with fascinating disjunctures. These gaps have emphasized for me how strongly all aspects of communication and understanding are reliant on our unique personal experiences and contexts.

Interacting with people from different contexts, with a variety of perspectives and cultural expectations, can help disrupt assumptions, highlight the situated nature of taken-for-granted norms, and present previously unpondered paths and possibilities. Aiming at cultivating this kind of critical cosmopolitan openness, I have, over the course of multiple semesters, arranged for my students to participate in a plethora of intercultural exchanges. These exchanges have involved Korean students at both the high school and university levels writing to partners in Korea, the United States, and Japan. While the prospect of pen pals was typically embraced with eager enthusiasm by my students, the exchanges, themselves, experienced varying levels of success as external factors related to myself and my partner-teacher either facilitated or hampered fluid interaction.

This paper offers a reflective, candid postmortem exploration of factors – personal and otherwise – that aided or impeded the exchanges, with the ultimate aim of uncovering considerations and recommendations for teachers interested in implementing similar online cross-cultural exchanges.

WHY DO A CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE?

There are a variety of reasons to incorporate cross-cultural exchanges into the language classroom – from the personal to the pedagogical.

Enhancing Motivation

The three keys to motivation, in a nutshell, are said to be autonomy, purpose, and mastery (Pink, 2009). Cross-cultural exchanges naturally incorporate these three elements. First, autonomy exists in the form of choice: Students choose how much of themselves to reveal, which conversational threads and topics to pursue based on what has piqued their interest, and how best to express themselves – including whether to include links, photos, emojis, and more. Purpose comes from the authentic audience; that is, "an audience that is concerned exclusively with the meaning of the speaker's message" (Johnston, 1999, p. 60). The students are not creating letters and projects purely for pedagogical purposes (i.e., solely for the teacher and a score in the class) but rather are sharing their lives and perspectives with a real person with whom they might form a connection. Finally, students can revise their letters and projects, especially in response to feedback from the instructor and/or their peers, allowing them to identify and revisit language forms they had difficulty with and revise accordingly, demonstrating their mastery of the material. The vast amount of choice available also ensures students can demonstrate mastery in a variety of ways, according to their own skill level, need, and desires.

Building Mental Models

Providing students with this kind of authentic opportunity for self-expression also helps them connect the learning to their own experiences and further flesh out their mental models. In a language classroom, this is particularly valuable, as students can begin to see English as a tool for communication rather than just an academic subject that can be memorized and then forgotten after the exam. Students are, in essence, "doing with understanding" (National Research Council, 2000, loc. 517) as they use language for a purpose. Indeed, students learn best when they see the point of mastering something; if teachers create a need (i.e., self-expression, especially for an authentic audience), students are more likely to integrate the expressions and target language into their mental model of English, helping them to "make sense of what they are learning" (National Research Council, 2000, loc. 2478) far more than alternatives that divorce language practice from purposeful communication.

Redefining What "Counts" as Learning

Valuing students' self-expression and positioning it as a way of demonstrating mastery also helps to redefine what counts as knowledge and learning, which in turn, supports inclusive, student-centered, and social justice-oriented pedagogies. Inviting students to write about themselves and their lives acknowledges the importance of their personal experience and provides a crucial connection between home and school. Gerald Campano (2007) argues that students (particularly immigrant students, though his analysis seems widely applicable) often experience a disconnect, an inability to relate the information presented in school to their own lives. He encourages teachers to bring students' home lives into the classroom as much as possible to help generate a sense of relevance and personalization of – and personal connections to – the knowledge. Asking students to write personal letters can help do this, demonstrating respect for what Moll et al. (1992) have termed *funds of knowledge*: the valuable wealth of information provided by the family, social, and community networks a student participates in outside of school. By accessing these funds of knowledge, teachers can create a more student-centered class that builds on students' personal strengths, interests, and abilities while challenging standard conceptualizations of what "doing school" means.

Supporting Cosmopolitan Orientations

In addition, interacting with others across difference encourages cosmopolitan orientations. Cosmopolitanism, in essence, entails openness and receptiveness to difference (Corpus Ong, 2009; Hannerz, 1990); empathy and forgiveness (Ahn, 2010); trust (Hirose, 2019) and belonging (Ramadan, 2015; Vasudevan, 2014); solidarity, mutuality, and connectedness (Glick Schiller, 2015; Osler & Starkey, 2018; Sobré-Denton & Bardhan, 2013); and an underlying thread of fundamental hospitality (Derrida, 2001). Connecting with others, discovering shared interests, giving others the benefit of the doubt, and positioning oneself as a receptive and interested interlocutor are all cosmopolitan aspects of cross-cultural exchanges (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014).

Cosmopolitanism involves, too, a more critical awareness of the contextual, limited nature of our understandings. It highlights the values of plurality, the acknowledgement that there are many possible perspectives and ways of being in the world, and fallibility, the idea that our particular perspectives and beliefs are not necessarily "right" (Appiah, 2006). Intercultural exchanges can help cultivate these aspects, as interacting with others across difference typically entails a discovery of new paths and possibilities in the world – and by encountering these new perspectives, we "gain reflective distance from [our own prejudices]" (Hansen, 2014, p. 9) and begin to notice the limitations in our own understandings, leading us to grow and evolve. Communication across difference also involves perspective-taking and encourages new awareness of the situated nature of what we consider "normal." Indeed, "activities can be viewed as social practices situated within communities invested with particular norms and values" (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 5); the meanings we create and the meanings we understand are necessarily informed by our own experiences and perspectives. As

we interact with others, creating meaning necessitates some consideration of the audience's perspective and situation, as well as reflection on our own position, in order to determine how best to express ourselves using our repertoire of semiotic resources (Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1998; van Leeuwen, 2005). Cosmopolitanism thus is not only a space of hospitality but also one in which "shifts in self-understanding" (Delanty, 2009, p. 11) can occur as people engage with others across difference.

IMPLEMENTING A CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Stories of Success

My First Endeavor: A Physical Exchange Within Korea

My first exchange wasn't "cross-cultural," strictly speaking; instead, it was an exchange between a boys high school and a girls high school in the same city, with subsequent exchanges between boys, girls, and co-ed high schools in other parts of Korea. Though these initial forays occurred between students in the same country, ostensibly with similar cultural backgrounds, the students' respective contexts – all boys vs. all girls vs. co-ed, a city in the mainland vs. a more rural island community – arguably involved quite different (micro-)cultures and perhaps even underscored differences that became evident in the face of presumed homogeneity.

At the time, I was a novice teacher starting my second semester as a Fulbright English teaching assistant (ETA) at an all-boys high school in Jeju-do. For this initial exchange, I teamed up with a fellow ETA teaching at my high school's sister school (located just down the road); the following semester, I partnered with an ETA teaching at a girls high school in Daejeon, a much larger city on the mainland; the semester after that involved exchanges among multiple schools across Jeju-do as well as in Daejeon. All of these exchanges entailed an exchange of physical personal ads and letters, much to the excitement of our students, and each exchange was a multi-week endeavor.

This initial exchange established a procedure that I follow (with minor adjustments) to this day, nearly two decades later, for pen pal exchanges. I first did a lesson on personal ads, introducing the concept and inviting students to read a selection of personal ads using common self-introduction language, including personality, hobbies, likes/dislikes, favorite things (favorite color/sport/proverb/animal, etc.), and ideal match. From among these ads, the students selected the person they were most interested in meeting and told their partner whom they chose and why. With great fanfare, I then revealed each person's picture – and students were delighted to discover that each personal ad actually described a popular fictional character (e.g., the fifth hokage from the anime *Naruto*, Nami from the anime *One Piece*, Fiona from *Shrek*, etc.). Using these personal ads as models, each student then wrote their own, including a unique, assigned identification number for easy tracking. My partner-teachers offered similar lessons to their own students, and then we swapped the resulting personal ads. In the next lesson, we spread the newly arrived ads around the room and invited our respective students to each choose one personal ad.

Students then wrote a Western-style personal letter to that person, with format and phrasing suggestions provided by a model letter. Finally, my partner-teachers and I sent the letters to each other, distributed them to the correct students, helped students write and revise reply letters, and then collected the students' final drafts for one last mailing. Students, it should be noted, thus had two different pen pals: the person whom they chose and the person who chose them; this way, they were almost guaranteed a substantial response even if one pen pal proved unreliable.

These exchanges were wildly successful, with students vociferously expressing their enthusiasm and repeatedly inquiring about when they would receive replies from their pen pals. My partner-teachers and I were similarly excited, exchanging a flurry of emails and text messages about our students' engagement and sharing gossip about the couples that had apparently developed from these exchanges.

The exchanges had their share of challenges, though, especially in terms of the sheer number of students participating (around 430 at my school, alone, and far more than that at the girls school in Daejeon). Other aspects that required careful consideration were coordinating the timing of the project and managing the class, including warning students not to throw away or crumble up unchosen personal ads (a problem we honestly had not anticipated when planning the exchange) and not to include their contact information in the personal ads (so students couldn't send text messages in Korean to the person before deciding whether or not to write to them). In the pilot exchange, the one connecting my students to female students at their sister school, my partner-teacher and I also quickly discovered a need to further obscure identifying information beyond simply using official student ID numbers, as we each caught students messaging their friends at the partner school to ask if the writers of particular personal ads were attractive. It is common for Korean students to be familiar with each other's official ID numbers, so using these was not an effective way to mask students' identities.

My fellow teachers and I also invested a large amount of time in managing students' emotions. We strived to ensure each of our own students received an ad to which they could write and also to make sure each ad received a reply; this involved keeping track of who wrote to whom and making sure the letters identified both the sender and recipient (i.e., that the letters were addressed to someone and also said whom they were from. That this was surprisingly challenging might be attributed to our students' overall lack of familiarity with traditional forms of communication such as email or physical letters; these students were likely more accustomed to text messaging, which doesn't require explicit inclusion of either a "to" or a "from"). We also monitored students' replies for rudeness (including Korean curse words that our students thought we might not know) – a surprising trend, particularly among my boys.

My partner-teachers and I were able to manage (and learn from) these challenges by drawing on two key strengths: extensive communication and a mutual duty of care. We frequently discussed the exchanges in depth via email, text message, and in person, and we felt an ethical responsibility to make this the best possible experience for everyone involved – not just our own students but also our partners' students. This ethical duty sometimes involved begging students to write a second (or third) letter so everyone received a reply, or even writing a fake letter or two, ourselves, on blank stationery provided by our partner-teachers

just in case a reply letter went astray.

This fluid communication and mutual duty of care were greatly facilitated by our personal connection (as friends, ETAs in the same cohort, and colleagues who had previously collaborated on winter camps) and mutual respect as well as our shared and equal investment in the success of the exchange. Other enabling factors included our shared goals (i.e., fun and providing an authentic context for communication), the similar levels of investment/interest among our respective students, our operating on the same academic calendar (which helped with the timing of the exchange), and our relative lack of other commitments (i.e., we had sufficient spare time to dedicate to this process). I didn't fully appreciate these facilitating factors at the time; in retrospect, however, they were instrumental in ensuring the triumph of the exchange – as became clear with subsequent exchanges, both virtual and physical, of varying success.

A Fully Integrated Online Exchange

My most fully integrated exchange, and also one of my most successful, occurred in Fall 2018, about a decade after I left Jeju-do to teach at a university on the mainland. It was a semester-long project conducted in my English composition class, a mandatory course for third-year English education majors. Over the course of the semester, my 28 students interacted extensively with diverse students at a community college in the eastern United States. They exchanged emails with an assigned partner, created and shared multimodal projects in a Facebook group designed for the purpose, and completed additional reflection and writing activities.

My partner-teacher, "Sam," was a classmate in my distance doctoral program. She taught at a community college in the eastern United States and had a little space in her curriculum for an intercultural exchange, so she generously incorporated it into her plans at my request. As we discussed our intentions, priorities, and ideas prior to the start of the semester, it quickly became clear that we had radically different visions for this exchange. Fortunately, we had worked together on class projects in the past, so we had experience in compromising with each other in order to achieve our respective goals.

After some initial friction, we came up with a plan involving similar, agreed-upon activities supporting shared pedagogical goals and disparate projects with independently designed tasks that would mesh but also suit our own individual goals. Both classes read a description of their partners' context before the pen pals were actually assigned, for example; at Sam's (excellent) suggestion, Sam and I wrote and then swapped descriptions of our respective contexts (demographics about the composition of the student body, the goals of the school, and other salient aspects we thought might be intriguing) so students could reflect on their expectations and curiosities prior to the start of the exchange. Activities completed exclusively by my students, on the other hand, included a variety of reflection activities, such as pre-exchange reflections in response to the context description and guided by question prompts. In addition, when many of my students' reflections included similar questions about the diverse community college and its students (primarily questions my students thought might be too insensitive or intrusive to ask their pen pals), I arranged for a Zoom call with Sam during my class time so students could ask her directly. Both classes engaged

in a pen pal exchange and Facebook discussions of projects the students created and shared, but the focus and requirements of these projects were separately determined. While Sam's students, many of whom were immigrants in the United States, created video reflections on stereotypes and prejudice they had experienced, my students created projects to introduce an aspect of their culture (Korean culture, university culture, their family's culture, etc.) to their overseas counterparts.

The exchange was, on the whole, very popular and well received by my students, but like the exchange in Jeju-do, it required some effort and coordination to overcome its challenges. Obstacles to the smooth running of this exchange included differing numbers of students – but compared to the Jeju exchange, the numbers and the difference were far more manageable (only 28 students on my end, while Sam taught 23). We also had to work out the timing of the exchange, as my semester started slightly before hers, and my classes were interrupted throughout the term by a mandatory two-week teaching practicum and Korean national holidays. Finally, as with the Jeju exchange, my collaborator and I worked to ensure a positive experience for all involved, including striving to make sure each project shared on Facebook received at least one response and that each pen pal received a reply. This latter concern required additional communication between me and Sam and extra work on Sam's part to follow up with negligent students and, several times, to reassign my students to more active and enthusiastic correspondents. Her efforts were not always successful, though; while a majority of my students reported receiving two or more replies from their pen pals, including three (10.3%) who received four or more replies, 9 students (31%) received just one reply from their pen pal, and one student received zero replies despite having sent multiple emails to their initial pen pal and additional attempts to contact new pen pals after being reassigned. A few students expressed disappointment with the lack of response; one student, for example, enjoyed the exchange but noted, "One sad thing was that there were students who did not participate in exchange activities sincerely," a sentiment echoed in a few other students' final reflections or evaluation forms.

The enduring problems with a lack of response – or only minimal response – on the part of Sam's students, meanwhile, can be attributed to our differing expectations, investment, and enforcement. For me, the authentic interaction provided by the exchange was an integral part of my composition class – and also was the basis of an inquiry project for my doctoral coursework. In contrast, the exchange was a peripheral part of Sam's class; her course was focused on service learning, and her participation in the exchange was simply a generous favor to me. We also had different types of students with varying definitions of academic success, different engagement with academic requirements, and different priorities during non-class time. My students were attending a competitive university, planning to become teachers, primarily concerned with completing their university education, and tended to be quite focused on scores and grades; Sam's students, in contrast, tended to be taking classes part-time while working and, often, caring for and contributing to their families. Sam's students also tended to be from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and even national backgrounds, while my students were all Korean and had minimal overseas experience; the opportunity to communicate with a multicultural pen pal was thus, I would speculate, likely to be more

exciting to my own students on the whole compared to Sam's.

Overall, though, the exchange was a success, facilitated by my very positive relationship with Sam, our mutual respect, our shared interest in cultivating cosmopolitan openness, and our dedication to our teaching and students. Though Sam's curriculum changed in subsequent years, preventing her from collaborating on future exchanges, the success of this integrated exchange encouraged me to seek out other overseas collaborators for similar exchanges.

Communication in the Time of COVID

By the time COVID hit in the spring of 2020 and my university's classes were moved online, I had been offering workshops on digital tools for nearly a decade and was extremely familiar with Zoom from my own distance doctorate work. Though implementing online-only classes necessitated greater time investment, I welcomed it as a chance to put into in-depth practical use some of the tools I had dabbled in already – one of which was Padlet, an online bulletin board. Padlet, I decided, would be an ideal space for online pen pals to exchange letters while also letting me keep track of their work.

At the virtual KOTESOL National Conference in April 2020, I reached out to fellow conference attendees via the backchannel chatrooms provided by the conference, and I inquired if anyone (preferably someone teaching at the university level) was interested in starting an online pen pal exchange. A university teacher in Japan took me up on my offer, and we started to coordinate the online exchange. This would be the first time I had tried an international exchange with my first-year university students, all of whom were majoring in specific aspects of elementary education (in this case, English education, special education, and pedagogy), and all of whom were taking an introductory, mandatory English conversation course with me.

The overall structure of this exchange was similar to my first exchange in Jeju-do, except entirely online. First, my students did a lesson on personal ads (along with the "read and choose" activity described previously), then they used Canva to design multimodal personal ads introducing themselves, following the models provided by the personal ads provided in the "read and choose" activity as well as a multimodal ad I designed for myself to give students an idea for how I expected text and imagery to work together to create meaning. Students posted their completed multimodal ad on a class padlet. After each student had posted an ad, I swapped Padlet links with my partner teacher in Japan. In the next lesson, our students visited the partner school's Padlet collection of personal ads, selected one person with whom they were interested in corresponding, and claimed that ad by posting (as a comment on that ad) a link to a personal padlet they had created for the purpose of communicating with this individual pen pal. Students wrote a response letter to that person, again following a model letter with an eye toward meeting the requirements I had set (e.g., must include three or more personal questions and three or more things about themselves). Finally, they posted their final draft as a PDF on their personal padlet for their new pen pal to view. (In an effort to take full advantage of the digital medium and capitalize on students' multiliteracies, I also required students throughout this exchange to include on their padlet additional resources for their pen pal. If they mentioned in their letter their favorite song, for instance, they might also post a

link to the music video for that song; if they mentioned their pet dog, uploading a photo or drawing of the pup was encouraged. Students had freedom of choice in what they included, as long as they posted at least two additional resources for each letter they "sent" via Padlet.) As with my Jeju students, each student had two pen pals: the person they chose (with whom they corresponded on their own personal padlet) and the person who chose them (with whom they corresponded on the pen pal's personal padlet). For about six weeks, my students were required to write a (brief) letter each week to one pen pal, alternating between the two, typically with a few content requirements laid out according to that week's class focus (e.g., asking about preferences using superlatives, asking experience questions using present perfect tense, etc.). Links to the students' individual correspondence platforms were always accessible via the class padlets (the personal ad collections).

The challenges of this exchange were generally easy to anticipate based on my prior experiences. We had slightly differing numbers of students, but the numbers and gaps were much smaller and more manageable than they had been in Jeju. Coordinating the timing was a bit of a challenge, since the Korean and Japanese academic calendars were off by more than a month, and a few technical issues required troubleshooting. But overall, the exchange was a success, greatly facilitated by active communication between my partner teacher and I; our mutual, diligent efforts to ensure every ad was claimed and responses posted in a timely fashion; our similar levels of investment in the project; shared overall goals (fun and communication), with specificities individually set to suit our respective pedagogical and curriculum goals; and a similar level of investment from students – particularly since this exchange was mandatory in both of our classes. As a result, my students in a semester-end survey overwhelmingly agreed that they had enjoyed having a pen pal (25 students agreed or strongly agreed, with only five students marking neutral and no one disagreeing on a five-point Likert scale), while many specifically mentioned the pen pal exchange in response to the open-ended question: "Which activities did you enjoy MOST in this class?" A completely online intercultural exchange, it seemed, could be highly rewarding even when it wasn't as fully integrated as my previous exchange with Sam.

A STORY OF FAILURE

Pleased with the success of our previous collaboration, my partner teacher in Japan and I decided to try another digital exchange after classes returned to face-to-face; in the fall of 2022, we initiated another exchange. This time, I had far too many first-year students in my five introductory conversation classes to match well with my partner's single class, so I decided to try this exchange with third-year English education majors taking the same mandatory writing class that had been so conducive to the exchange with Sam four years prior. My partner and I had each built personal and cultural introductions into our course syllabi, and we agreed that one pen pal per pupil was probably sufficient this time. My partner's students thus created personal ads as well as a personal padlet for correspondence, while mine did not; a few weeks later, my students claimed a pen pal and posted a reply letter on their pen pal's personal padlet.

This is where the exchange faltered. The Korean autumn semester is always a bit challenging for course planning, in general, due to the many national holidays that pop up in September and October (i.e., the multi-day Chuseok holiday, Hangeul Day, and National Foundation Day); in addition, third-year students at my university always spend two weeks in October doing practice teaching at assigned elementary schools. I thought my semester plan adequately accounted for both the Korean and Japanese school schedules as well as my students' planned two-week absence; my partner's students would have to wait a couple of weeks for a response to their ads and self-introductions, but that seemed reasonable to me. A month into our semester, I required my students to choose a pen pal and post a personal letter, and I allocated time in each class thereafter to reply to pen pals; however, very few of my students ever received a response. After being repeatedly rebuffed, most lost interest. We ended up never sharing our multimodal culture-introduction projects with our hypothetical partners in Japan, and the class in Japan never shared their own culture projects with us. The communication between my partner and I was very limited, and the exchange quietly lapsed.

All of these factors contributed to the ultimate failure of this exchange. My students were incommunicado for two weeks at the start, and though I had warned my partner of this timing and also alerted him when the replies had been posted, it seems this gap was enough to dim his students' enthusiasm. Although we had shared goals of fun, authentic communication, and cultural exchange, the exchange this time was incidental to our core syllabi – a bonus rather than an integral element – and as a result, we both had limited investment in this exchange, and neither of us seemed particularly avid about enforcing the requirements or following up on students' work. My students started out with a high level of investment and enthusiasm, but this soon petered out with the ongoing disinterest from their pen pals. It was disappointing, on the whole, for everyone involved.

TAKEAWAYS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Pen pal exchanges, both virtual and physical, can offer amazing, motivating opportunities for students to engage in authentic communication and cosmopolitan growth; however, as I have discovered from experience, there are plenty of challenges that must be overcome in order to maximize the potential and success of the exchange. Participating teachers must carefully plan around different schedules and different goals; make the exchange an integral element in their classes, such as by customizing the requirements to suit their own pedagogical purposes and mandating (and following up on) student participation; and invest time and effort into managing students' emotions, including by ensuring each student receives a response and possibly even checking the appropriateness of the content and language in their students' letters – particularly with younger or less restrained learners. Communication between partner teachers, careful consideration of the exchange's structure and organization, and sufficient time to manage the exchange are thus critical.

A key element underpinning all of this – an inviolable element, really, easily

overlooked when focusing on the practicalities – is a cosmopolitan duty of care between participating teachers. This refers to a sense of mutual obligation to help each other craft a meaningful, positive experience; it includes mutuality and connectedness, trust and empathy, perspective-taking and openness. It means giving each other the benefit of the doubt and seeking to support not just our own students but our partner's, as well. It means giving students opportunities to discover new pathways and perspectives, to notice and question taken-for-granted norms, to reflect and grow. Ultimately, these exchanges, in their spirit as well as their demands, have the potential to help all participants – teachers and students alike – become more empathetic, responsive, critical citizens of the world.

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