



English as a Shared Intercultural Language in India–Japan Virtual Exchange: Communication Challenges, Shared Understanding, and Intercultural Learning

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines English as a shared intercultural language in an India–Japan virtual exchange involving university students from both countries. Drawing on student reflections and researcher observations, it explores communication challenges, English use, and intercultural experiences. Thematic analysis identified difficulties related to pronunciation, perceived fluency differences, hesitation, turn-taking, and online audio conditions. Despite these challenges, participants sustained communication through accessible topics, visual support, supportive responses, and continued interaction. The findings suggest that successful intercultural communication depends on flexibility, cooperation, and willingness to manage difficulty rather than grammatical accuracy alone, offering implications for the design of future virtual exchanges.

Keywords

India–Japan virtual exchange; English as a shared intercultural language; intercultural communication; shared understanding; supportive communication; intercultural learning

1. Introduction

Virtual exchange enables students in geographically distant institutions to communicate and collaborate without undertaking physical international mobility. Through structured online interaction, learners can share cultural knowledge, discuss different perspectives, and use English for authentic purposes beyond the language classroom. Virtual exchange has therefore become an important approach to internationalization at home, particularly for students who may have limited opportunities to participate in overseas study programs. Previous research indicates that well-designed online exchanges can support language development, intercultural communicative competence, collaborative learning, and engagement with culturally diverse perspectives (Avgousti, 2018; O'Dowd, 2018).

The India–Japan context is particularly relevant because students from the two countries bring different linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds to their interactions. Indian students may



use English regularly within multilingual educational and social environments, whereas Japanese students frequently learn English primarily as a foreign language in formal educational settings. Nevertheless, English is not necessarily the first language of either group. During virtual exchange, it consequently functions as a shared intercultural language through which students introduce their cultures, ask questions, compare experiences, and develop interpersonal relationships.

Communication in such contexts cannot be evaluated only according to grammatical accuracy or conformity to native-speaker norms. English-as-a-lingua-franca research emphasizes that communicative effectiveness depends on participants' ability to accommodate one another, prevent or repair misunderstandings, and collaboratively establish meaning (Matsumoto, 2011; Taguchi & Caprario, 2026). Strategies such as clarification requests, repetition, paraphrasing, simplification, confirmation checks, examples, and non-verbal resources can help speakers sustain interaction despite differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and cultural knowledge.

Virtual-exchange studies have frequently reported improvements in learner confidence, satisfaction, intercultural awareness, engagement, and willingness to communicate. However, research has often relied heavily on questionnaires and participants' perceptions of the exchange. Comparatively less attention has been given to the communication processes through which multilingual learners establish understanding during interaction. Research examining misunderstandings, clarification, repair, linguistic adjustment, and collaborative meaning negotiation remains limited, particularly in Asian virtual-exchange contexts.

There is also limited research specifically investigating India–Japan virtual exchange. Consequently, little is known about how Indian and Japanese students use English strategically when communication becomes difficult or how their interaction contributes to mutual cultural understanding. Examining English as a shared intercultural language shifts attention from linguistic deficiencies to participants' cooperation, adaptability, and ability to achieve communicative goals.

This qualitative case study examines how Indian and Japanese university students use English as a shared intercultural language during virtual exchange. It focuses on communication challenges, the communicative resources and supportive practices used to maintain interaction, and the development of mutual cultural understanding.

1. What communication challenges do Indian and Japanese students experience during virtual exchange?
2. What communicative resources and supportive practices help participants maintain interaction and shared understanding?
3. How does English-mediated interaction contribute to mutual cultural understanding?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Virtual Exchange in Language Education

Virtual exchange refers to structured, technology-mediated interaction between learners from different geographical, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. It allows students to participate in



international communication and collaborative learning without traveling abroad. Virtual exchange developed from earlier practices known as telecollaboration and now includes approaches such as Collaborative Online International Learning, commonly referred to as COIL (Helm, 2015; O'Dowd, 2018).

Although the terms virtual exchange, telecollaboration, and COIL are sometimes used differently, they generally describe sustained online interaction between students from different institutions under the guidance of teachers. These exchanges are normally integrated into courses and involve planned tasks, preparation, interaction, reflection, and assessment (O'Dowd, 2018). Unlike informal communication through social media, educational virtual exchange is designed to achieve specific linguistic, intercultural, or disciplinary learning outcomes.

Virtual exchange provides learners with authentic opportunities to use English. Instead of using English only for textbook exercises or simulated conversations, students communicate with international partners to introduce themselves, explain cultural practices, compare experiences, ask questions, solve problems, and complete shared tasks. Such interaction may help students understand English as a practical means of communication rather than only as a school subject (Fuchs, 2020; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020).

Another important contribution of virtual exchange is increased access to international education. Physical study abroad may not be possible for many students because of financial limitations, family responsibilities, health concerns, institutional restrictions, or scheduling difficulties. Virtual exchange cannot reproduce every aspect of living abroad, but it can provide meaningful international interaction for students who may otherwise have limited access to intercultural experiences (Helm, 2015; O'Dowd, 2018).

Previous research has identified several possible benefits of virtual exchange. Linguistically, it may support fluency, listening comprehension, vocabulary development, pragmatic awareness, and communication-strategy use. Affectively, virtual exchange may promote confidence, motivation, engagement, and willingness to communicate. It may also contribute to intercultural awareness by exposing students to different experiences, values, perspectives, and communication practices (Avgousti, 2018; Ennis et al., 2021; Fuchs, 2020).

However, positive outcomes are not automatic. The success of a virtual exchange depends on task design, technological access, teacher mediation, preparation, partner participation, and opportunities for reflection. If tasks are unclear or interaction is insufficiently supported, communication may remain superficial or become dominated by more confident participants (Avgousti, 2018; Helm, 2015). Virtual exchange should therefore be viewed as a carefully designed pedagogical process rather than simply an online meeting between students.

2.2 English as a Lingua Franca and Shared Intercultural Language



English as a lingua franca, or ELF, refers to the use of English among speakers who have different first languages. In ELF communication, English serves as a common linguistic resource rather than belonging exclusively to native speakers or one national community (Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011).

ELF research challenges the assumption that successful communication must follow native-speaker language norms. Instead, it prioritizes intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, accommodation, cooperation, flexibility, and shared understanding. A speaker may use a non-standard grammatical form or a distinctive pronunciation while still communicating successfully. The central issue is whether participants understand each other and achieve their communicative purposes (Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Successful ELF interaction often requires speakers to adapt their language according to their partners' needs. Accommodation may include speaking more slowly, repeating an expression, replacing unfamiliar vocabulary, paraphrasing an idea, or checking whether the listener has understood. Such practices show that communication is collaboratively achieved rather than determined only by an individual speaker's linguistic accuracy (Cogo, 2009; Matsumoto, 2011).

This study uses the term shared intercultural language to highlight the collaborative and intercultural nature of English use in the India–Japan virtual exchange. English is shared because Indian and Japanese participants jointly use, interpret, and adapt it during interaction. It is intercultural because participants use English to communicate across differences in language, education, cultural experience, expectations, and identity.

The term also avoids presenting English as a fixed system controlled by native speakers. Instead, it emphasizes how multilingual participants use their available linguistic resources to achieve mutual understanding. This perspective is relevant to India–Japan interaction because students may have different levels and types of English exposure. Indian students may have experience using English in multilingual educational environments, while Japanese students may have learned English primarily as a foreign language in formal classrooms.

These differences may influence pronunciation, fluency, confidence, vocabulary, and communication style. However, differences should not automatically be treated as deficiencies. ELF research suggests that effective communication depends on participants' willingness to accommodate each other and collaboratively manage misunderstandings (Cogo, 2009; Jenkins, 2015). English therefore functions not merely as a neutral communication tool but as a flexible shared resource through which participants construct interpersonal and intercultural relationships (Baker, 2015).

2.3 Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are the verbal, non-verbal, and technology-supported resources that participants use to express meaning, address communication problems, and maintain interaction. They are particularly important in multilingual virtual exchange because students may differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, speaking speed, listening ability, cultural knowledge, and confidence (Canals, 2022; Vettorel, 2018).



A clarification request occurs when a participant asks for additional explanation because an utterance is unclear. Expressions such as “What does that mean?”, “Could you explain that?”, or “Could you say it again?” signal that understanding has not yet been achieved. Clarification requests allow the original speaker to repeat, simplify, or reformulate the message.

Confirmation checks occur when listeners propose an interpretation and ask whether it is correct. For example, a participant may ask, “Do you mean that this festival is held every year?” Comprehension checks are generally initiated by speakers who want to determine whether their partners have followed an explanation, using questions such as “Is that clear?” or “Do you understand this word?” These strategies help participants monitor understanding collaboratively (Matsumoto, 2011).

Repetition may involve repeating a word, phrase, or complete explanation. Speakers may repeat their own words more slowly or repeat part of a partner’s statement to check what they heard. Rephrasing and paraphrasing involve expressing the same meaning using different words or sentence structures. Simplification may include shorter sentences, more familiar vocabulary, and the division of complex information into smaller units (Cogo, 2009; Vettorel, 2018).

Exemplification is particularly useful in intercultural communication. Students may explain an unfamiliar cultural practice by giving a personal example, comparing it with a familiar practice, displaying an object, or describing a specific situation. Slower speech, pauses, and waiting time may also support understanding by allowing listeners more time to process information and prepare responses.

Online platforms provide additional resources for communication. Students may type unfamiliar words into the chat, spell names or local terms, share images, display presentation slides, or use links and visual materials. Written chat may support spoken communication when participants have difficulty recognizing pronunciation or remembering unfamiliar vocabulary (Canals, 2022).

Collaborative completion occurs when one participant helps another finish a sentence or supplies a missing word. Supportive responses such as nodding, smiling, acknowledging an answer, and encouraging hesitant speakers may reduce anxiety and help maintain interaction. Code-switching or translanguaging may also occur when participants use another language, translation, or culturally specific vocabulary to support meaning (Canals, 2022).

These strategies should not be considered only as responses to linguistic weakness. In multilingual communication, they represent forms of strategic competence and cooperation. Their effectiveness depends on whether they help participants maintain interaction and achieve shared understanding.

2.4 Meaning Negotiation

Meaning negotiation refers to the interactional work that participants perform when understanding is incomplete, uncertain, or disrupted. It occurs when speakers identify a communication difficulty and



collaboratively attempt to resolve it through clarification, repetition, reformulation, confirmation, or other strategic responses (Cogo, 2009; Matsumoto, 2011).

A common negotiation sequence can be represented as follows:

Communication difficulty → Signal of non-understanding → Clarification or reformulation → Confirmation → Restored understanding

For example, a Japanese student may not understand the name of an Indian cultural event. The student may signal non-understanding by asking the Indian partner to repeat or explain the term. The Indian student may then speak more slowly, type the word in the chat, provide a simpler explanation, or show an image. The Japanese participant may confirm the interpretation before the conversation continues.

Meaning negotiation may involve both linguistic and cultural understanding. A learner may understand the individual English words but remain uncertain about the cultural meaning of a practice. Conversely, a cultural idea may be familiar while the vocabulary or pronunciation used to describe it remains unclear. Participants therefore negotiate not only words and grammatical forms but also cultural assumptions, experiences, and interpretations (Baker, 2015).

Negotiation is important because it transforms misunderstanding into an opportunity for collaborative communication. Rather than treating difficulty as failure, participants may use it to develop greater awareness of their own language, their partners' needs, and alternative ways of expressing meaning. Because the present study does not include a systematic analysis of recorded interaction, meaning negotiation is examined through participants' reported experiences and researcher observations rather than through detailed conversational sequences.

2.5 Intercultural Communication in Asian Virtual Exchange

Intercultural communication involves interaction among people whose cultural and linguistic experiences differ. However, culture should not be understood as a fixed collection of national characteristics. Indian and Japanese students do not represent uniform national cultures. Their communication may be influenced by region, language, education, personality, social identity, disciplinary background, and previous international experience (Baker, 2015).

Differences in communication expectations may nevertheless affect virtual exchange. Participants may have different understandings of silence, turn-taking, politeness, eye contact, directness, disagreement, and appropriate levels of personal disclosure. For example, silence may indicate hesitation, careful thinking, respect, limited confidence, or difficulty identifying an opportunity to speak. It should not automatically be interpreted as disinterest.

Confidence may also influence participation. Students with greater English proficiency or prior international experience may speak more frequently, while less confident learners may need



additional waiting time, preparation, or direct invitations to contribute. Communication may therefore become unequal unless tasks and group structures support balanced participation (Avgousti, 2018; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020).

Topic familiarity can affect the quality of interaction. Students may communicate more easily about food, festivals, hobbies, university life, and daily routines. Religious, historical, political, or unfamiliar cultural topics may require more explanation and careful interpretation. Visual support, examples, and follow-up questions can help learners discuss such topics meaningfully.

Virtual-exchange research should avoid reinforcing national stereotypes. Statements such as “Japanese students are quiet” or “Indian students speak English confidently” fail to recognize individual variation. An intercultural approach views culture as dynamic, negotiated, and personally experienced. Virtual exchange may help learners question stereotypes when they encounter diverse experiences and opinions among students from the same country (Baker, 2015; Fuchs, 2020).

2.6 Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

Existing research demonstrates that virtual exchange can contribute to language development, confidence, digital literacy, and intercultural awareness (Avgousti, 2018; Ennis et al., 2021; Fuchs, 2020). ELF research also emphasizes intelligibility, accommodation, cooperation, and strategic language use among multilingual speakers (Cogo, 2009; Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2011).

However, these areas have not been sufficiently integrated in research on India–Japan virtual exchange. Previous studies often concentrate on participants’ satisfaction, confidence, willingness to communicate, or general perceptions of intercultural learning. Less attention has been given to how learners respond to communication difficulties and collaboratively establish understanding.

Research specifically examining interaction between Indian and Japanese university students remains limited. There is therefore a need to investigate the challenges participants encounter, the communicative resources and supportive practices that help them maintain interaction, and how English-mediated communication contributes to mutual cultural understanding.

The present study integrates virtual exchange, English as a lingua franca or shared intercultural language, communication strategies, and meaning negotiation. Its conceptual framework is:

Communication challenge → Supportive communicative response → Maintenance of shared understanding → Interpersonal connection → Intercultural learning

This framework proposes that communication difficulties do not necessarily indicate failure. A challenge may encourage participants to adjust their speech, provide examples, use visual materials, ask or answer questions, and offer supportive responses. These practices can help maintain shared understanding and sustain interaction. Continued experiences of explaining, listening, adjusting, and responding may subsequently support interpersonal connection and intercultural learning.

3. Methodology



This study employed a qualitative interpretive case-study design to investigate how Indian and Japanese university students used English as a shared intercultural language during a virtual exchange. A case-study approach was considered appropriate because the inquiry focused on communicative experiences, interactional challenges, and meaning-making practices within a bounded educational context (Yin, 2018).

The study involved a secondary, re-focused analysis of data collected during an India–Japan virtual exchange previously examined in relation to students’ confidence, cultural awareness, and overall perceptions (Muthumaniraja et al., 2025). In contrast to the earlier analysis, the present study concentrates specifically on communication difficulties, reported and observed communicative support, maintenance of interaction, and mutual intercultural understanding. The exchange context and participant group were therefore the same, but the analytical focus and research questions were distinct.

The virtual exchange was organized under the Global Lingua Pathways initiative between Ferris University in Japan and Stella Maris College in India. The initiative was designed to provide university students with an accessible opportunity to engage in international communication without physical mobility.

The exchange was conducted via Zoom in January 2025. The exchange lasted approximately 60 minutes. It was organized as an informal intercultural communication event and was not linked to formal course assessment. Before the session, students completed a questionnaire indicating their preferred topics, activities, and expectations. These responses informed the design of the exchange.

The session included self-introductions, ice-breaking questions, picture sharing, and guided discussion. Topics included university life, food, hobbies, festivals, traditions, cultural differences, and daily routines. Students were also introduced to the possibility of differences in pronunciation, communication style, turn-taking, and cultural expectations. They were encouraged to communicate patiently and respectfully and to seek clarification when meaning was unclear. The exchange brought together 10 Indian and 20 Japanese undergraduate students in a supportive English-mediated environment.

The participants were 30 undergraduate women, including 10 students from Stella Maris College and 20 students from Ferris University. They were between 18 and 20 years of age and represented different academic majors and years of study.

The Japanese participants had primarily studied English as a foreign language and had varying levels of experience in spontaneous international communication. The Indian participants were more accustomed to using English in multilingual academic settings. These differences were treated as features of the communicative context rather than as indicators of linguistic superiority or deficiency.

Participation in the exchange and in the research component was voluntary. Students received information about the purpose of the study and the use of their responses before providing consent.

The principal data sources were students’ open-ended responses collected before and after the exchange, teacher observation notes, and researcher reflective accounts. The descriptive frequencies



reported in Section 4 were calculated from the 35 usable open-ended entries collected through the post-exchange questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered through Microsoft Forms and completed anonymously.

The pre-exchange responses provided information about students' expectations, confidence, preferred activities, and discussion interests. The post-exchange responses focused on communication comfort, difficulties, cultural learning, memorable experiences, and recommendations for future exchanges. The earlier study also documented issues such as hesitation, overlapping speech, turn-taking difficulties, limited responses, technical problems, and the supportive use of picture sharing.

Because no interaction recordings with confirmed research consent were available for the present analysis, the study did not undertake conversation analysis of complete interactional sequences. The findings therefore concern communicative challenges, supportive resources, and interaction-management practices reported by students or documented in researcher observations.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Both researchers repeatedly read the responses and observation notes to become familiar with the dataset. Initial codes and developing themes were compared, discussed, and refined collaboratively.

Deductive codes were informed by previous research on communication strategies, interaction management, and shared understanding, while inductive codes were generated from recurring patterns in the data. Initial codes included difficulty understanding pronunciation, perceived fluency differences, hesitation, silence, limited responses, overlapping speech, turn-taking difficulty, question-and-answer interaction, picture sharing, visual support, peer assistance, cultural explanation, positive emotional responses, increased comfort, and desire for further interaction.

The codes were subsequently organized into four themes: linguistic and interactional challenges; turn-taking, silence, and technological conditions; English as a flexible shared resource; and intercultural learning and interpersonal connection. The themes were reviewed against the full dataset and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research questions. MAXQDA was used to organize and manage the qualitative data.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through comparison across multiple data sources, including student reflections, observation notes, and researcher accounts. Interpretations were considered from both the Indian and Japanese educational contexts to reduce the risk of culturally one-sided explanations.

Analytical decisions were documented throughout the coding process, and contrasting responses were retained rather than excluded. The analysis therefore considered both positive reports of cultural learning and enjoyment and less positive experiences involving communication difficulty, hesitation, unequal participation, and insufficient interaction time.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before the data were used for research. The questionnaires did not collect direct personal identifiers, and all responses were



anonymized. Participant codes were used in place of names, and the data were stored securely with access restricted to the researchers.

The present study re-analyzed data from the same virtual exchange examined in the earlier publication. This relationship was disclosed to ensure transparency and to distinguish the present analytical focus from the earlier study. No recordings, screenshots, or identifiable student materials were included without explicit permission.

4. Findings

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive frequencies were calculated to identify recurring ideas across 35 usable open-ended entries collected from the post-exchange questionnaire. Second, the entries were examined qualitatively to clarify how students experienced linguistic difficulty, interactional management, English-mediated communication, and intercultural engagement. Because individual entries could contain more than one idea, they were assigned to multiple categories. Consequently, the percentages reported in Table 1 do not total 100%. The number of entries exceeded the number of participants because the post-exchange questionnaire contained multiple open-ended questions.

Table 1: Frequency of Themes Identified in Open-Ended Questionnaire Entries (n = 35)

Theme	Frequency	Percentage
Positive experience and enjoyment	25	71.4%
Intercultural learning and interpersonal connection	12	34.3%
Desire for longer or future exchanges	11	31.4%
Linguistic challenges and language-development needs	8	22.9%
Turn-taking, silence, and participation difficulties	5	14.3%
Technical and audio difficulties	4	11.4%
Emerging communicative confidence	4	11.4%

Note. The dataset comprised 35 usable open-ended entries collected from the post-exchange questionnaire completed by the 30 participants. Entries were coded into more than one category when they contained multiple meanings; therefore, percentages do not total 100%. Anonymous response codes were used in place of identifying information, and the data were stored securely with access restricted to the researchers.



The most prominent finding was the highly positive evaluation of the exchange. Positive experience and enjoyment appeared in 25 of the 35 open-ended questionnaire entries (71.4%), with students describing the exchange as enjoyable, interesting, exciting, meaningful, or valuable. Intercultural learning and interpersonal connection appeared in 12 entries (34.3%). These responses referred to learning about another culture, interacting with friendly international peers, and developing a sense of connection.

A desire for longer or future exchanges appeared in 11 entries (31.4%). Students requested longer interaction periods, additional discussion topics, or further exchange opportunities. Linguistic challenges or language-development needs appeared in eight entries (22.9%). Turn-taking, silence, or difficulty entering the conversation appeared in five entries (14.3%), while technical or audio problems appeared in four entries (11.4%). These challenges were present but did not dominate students' overall evaluations of the exchange.

4.1 Linguistic and Interactional Challenges

The first theme concerned difficulties in understanding spoken English and producing responses during real-time interaction. Participants referred to pronunciation, listening, fluency differences, and difficulty speaking smoothly. One student explained:

"I cannot hear the pronunciation." (P05)

Another participant compared the English proficiency of the two groups:

"Their level of fluency in English was much higher than ours, so I sometimes felt that it was hard to catch up with what they were talking about." (P07)

This reflection suggests that perceived proficiency differences affected the student's ability to follow the conversation and may also have influenced confidence. A further participant stated:

"Speaking is very difficult, but talking with Indian students is fun. I want to speak English well." (P30)

The responses show that linguistic difficulty did not necessarily lead to withdrawal. Students often described communication as challenging while simultaneously expressing enjoyment and motivation. One participant captured this coexistence clearly:

"I couldn't speak smoothly, but I really enjoyed it." (P34)

These comments indicate that participants distinguished between grammatical or fluency limitations and the broader success of the interaction. Communication could remain meaningful even when students perceived their speech as incomplete or insufficiently fluent. These reflections indicate that



differences in previous English exposure and spontaneous communication experience may have shaped participants' perceptions of fluency and confidence.

4.2 Turn-Taking, Silence, and Technological Conditions

The second theme concerned interaction management rather than language proficiency alone. Students referred to silence, uncertainty about when to speak, large group size, overlapping sound, and difficulty participating through Zoom.

One participant reported:

"I felt that my Japanese teammates were not cooperative. There were moments of silence." (P04)

Although the participant interpreted silence as limited cooperation, other responses suggest that silence may also have resulted from hesitation or uncertainty about turn-taking. One student wrote:

"There were so many people that I often couldn't find the right time to start a conversation. However, it was much easier to talk when we did it with a small group of people." (P13)

Another recommended a more explicit participation structure:

"I think we should decide who will talk each time so that we don't have to wait for someone to speak." (P09)

These reflections indicate that participation was affected by group organization. Students sometimes needed clearer speaking roles, smaller groups, and more predictable turn-taking procedures. Silence should therefore not be interpreted automatically as disinterest or unwillingness to communicate.

Technology created an additional barrier. A participant explained:

"It was difficult to communicate with everyone because audio was coming from everyone's computer, so I thought it would be better if we all had separate rooms." (P15)

Another wrote:

"It is difficult for me to listen to the Zoom sound. It is uncomfortable." (P32)

These responses demonstrate that virtual-exchange communication was shaped by both linguistic and technological conditions. Poor sound quality, overlapping audio, group size, and limited breakout-room time reduced opportunities for participation.

4.3 English as a Flexible Shared Resource



The third theme concerned the way participants used English as a practical shared resource rather than as a demonstration of grammatical perfection. The reflections suggest that students were able to communicate despite hesitation, pronunciation differences, and perceived inequalities in proficiency.

One participant stated:

“The English level of the people in the group was high, so I learned a lot. I thought cultural exchange was fun.” (P08)

This response shows that exposure to partners with different English backgrounds was interpreted as a learning opportunity. Another student reported:

“I thought it was easy to communicate in English through this meeting.” (P33)

For this participant, the exchange appears to have challenged the assumption that international English communication would necessarily be inaccessible. Even students who described difficulty continued to participate and expressed a desire to improve. Comments such as “I have to improve my English” and “I want to speak English well” indicate increased awareness of language-learning needs, but they also demonstrate motivation generated by authentic interaction.

English therefore functioned flexibly within the exchange. Participants used the language to introduce themselves, discuss music and daily life, explain cultural experiences, and form interpersonal connections. The aim was not to reproduce a single native-speaker model but to make ideas understandable and respond meaningfully to international peers.

The current dataset does not contain detailed transcripts that would allow specific repair sequences, such as clarification requests or confirmation checks, to be analysed systematically. Nevertheless, the reflections demonstrate persistence, adjustment, and willingness to communicate despite difficulty. These qualities represent communicative competence rather than linguistic deficiency.

4.4 Intercultural Learning and Interpersonal Connection

The fourth theme concerned cultural learning, positive emotional engagement, and the development of interpersonal relationships. Students frequently described the exchange as enjoyable and valued the opportunity to learn directly from peers in another country.

One participant wrote:

“It was really meaningful for me. I could learn about India this time.” (P14)

Another stated:

“It was really fun talking and learning about different cultures.” (P23)

These comments show that cultural learning was linked to direct interaction rather than the passive reception of information. Students learned through discussion of everyday experiences, music, university life, food, and cultural practices.



Interpersonal connection was equally important. One participant explained:

“It felt like I was talking to friends rather than strangers.” (P20)

Another described the Japanese students as “sweet and friendly,” while a Japanese participant commented that the Indian students were “friendly and fun.” Such responses indicate that the exchange reduced interpersonal distance and helped students encounter their partners as individuals rather than only as representatives of India or Japan.

The strong desire for future interaction further demonstrates the value participants attached to the exchange. Students requested longer breakout-room sessions, additional topics, and repeated opportunities. Representative comments included:

“I would love to have spent more time with my new friends.” (P06)

“I want to join the discussion every weekend.” (P27)

“I want to talk more times and about more topics.” (P30)

These responses suggest that the exchange encouraged curiosity, openness, and willingness to continue intercultural engagement. The findings should not be interpreted as evidence that one short exchange produced complete intercultural competence. Rather, the session created an initial space in which participants could encounter linguistic differences, share cultural experiences, develop curiosity about their partners’ lives, and form positive relationships.

Overall, the findings support the following progression:

Communication challenge → Interactional or technological support → Shared understanding → Interpersonal connection → Intercultural learning

The exchange was meaningful not because communication occurred without difficulty, but because students continued to participate, learn, and establish relationships despite linguistic and technological constraints.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main Findings

This study examined the communication challenges experienced by Indian and Japanese university students, the communicative resources and supportive practices used to maintain interaction, and the contribution of English-mediated exchange to intercultural understanding. Regarding the first research question, communication difficulties arose from a combination of linguistic, affective, interactional, and technological factors. Participants referred to unfamiliar pronunciation, perceived differences in fluency, difficulty processing spoken English in real time, hesitation, silence, overlapping audio, uncertainty about when to enter the conversation, and insufficient interaction time. These findings demonstrate that communication difficulties in virtual exchange cannot be explained solely by language proficiency. Platform conditions, group organization,



confidence, previous communication experience, and turn-taking expectations also influenced students' participation (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023; Huang & Lanford, 2024).

The difficulties also appeared to reflect differences in prior English exposure. Some participants were more accustomed to using English in multilingual academic or social environments, whereas others had fewer opportunities to engage in spontaneous international communication. Such differences are important in English-as-a-lingua-franca contexts because speakers bring different accents, levels of fluency, language-learning histories, and communicative experiences. Effective interaction therefore depends on intelligibility, adaptability, and accommodation rather than uniform proficiency or conformity to native-speaker norms (Ishihara & Prado, 2021; Vettorel, 2018).

Regarding the second research question, participants maintained interaction through accessible discussion topics, question-and-answer exchanges, picture sharing, smaller breakout groups, patient listening, supportive responses, and a willingness to continue despite difficulty. Because detailed interaction recordings were unavailable, the study cannot establish the frequency or sequential structure of clarification, repetition, reformulation, or confirmation checks. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that shared understanding was supported through cooperation, flexibility, visual resources, and interactional persistence rather than grammatical accuracy alone. This interpretation is consistent with ELF research that conceptualizes communicative competence in terms of intelligibility, accommodation, flexibility, and the achievement of shared understanding (Canagarajah, 2007; Ishihara & Prado, 2021).

Regarding the third research question, English-mediated interaction contributed to intercultural learning by enabling students to discuss university life, music, food, hobbies, festivals, daily routines, and culturally specific practices. Students reported learning about another country, recognizing the friendliness of their partners, and feeling that they were communicating with friends rather than strangers. Shared understanding therefore involved both linguistic interpretation and the development of interpersonal relationships. The exchange provided students with an opportunity to connect cultural information with the personal experiences of their international peers.

5.2 English as a Shared Intercultural Language

The findings support the conceptualization of English as a shared intercultural language. English did not belong exclusively to either the Indian or Japanese participants, nor was successful communication dependent on reproducing a native-speaker model. Instead, its use was shaped by participants' different linguistic histories, levels of English exposure, accents, communicative confidence, and cultural knowledge.

Participants used English to make their personal and cultural experiences accessible to partners who did not share the same backgrounds. This required patience, accessible discussion topics, visual support, examples, supportive responses, and attention to partners' communicative needs. Even when speech was hesitant or grammatically imperfect, communication could remain meaningful. The participant who stated that speaking was difficult but communicating with Indian students was enjoyable illustrates that perceived linguistic limitation and communicative success can coexist.



The purpose of the interaction was not to reproduce idealized native-speaker English but to make ideas understandable and respond meaningfully to international peers. This interpretation is consistent with ELF scholarship, which views multilingual communication as a flexible and cooperative process in which meaning is collaboratively constructed (Canagarajah, 2007; Ishihara & Prado, 2021). Differences in pronunciation, fluency, and English-learning experience therefore became features of the interaction that participants needed to manage together rather than deficiencies that prevented communication.

The findings support ELF perspectives by highlighting the intercultural dimension of communicative adaptation. Participants used English to share cultural experiences, respond to different levels of confidence, and maintain interaction across linguistic and experiential differences. English therefore functioned as a shared resource through which cultural meaning and interpersonal connection were collaboratively developed. In this sense, effective communication depended not only on linguistic knowledge but also on openness, patience, cooperation, and willingness to remain engaged when communication became difficult.

5.3 Communication Difficulty as a Learning Opportunity

Communication difficulty should not automatically be interpreted as failure. In this exchange, difficulty appeared to increase students' awareness of pronunciation differences, perceived fluency gaps, turn-taking uncertainty, the limitations of large-group interaction, and the usefulness of smaller breakout rooms and visual materials. Students' reflections suggest that they became more conscious of both their own communicative needs and the conditions required for productive interaction.

When appropriately managed, communication difficulty can encourage learners to notice problems, adjust explanations, use examples, listen more carefully, and seek additional support. These practices may contribute to both language learning and intercultural learning because participants become more aware that familiar words, practices, and assumptions may not be immediately understandable to others (Ishihara & Prado, 2021). Difficulty can therefore create opportunities for learners to reconsider how clearly they communicate, how carefully they listen, and how effectively they respond to partners with different linguistic and cultural experiences.

However, communication difficulty becomes productive only when learners receive sufficient interactional and technological support. Silence, overlapping audio, unequal participation, large groups, and uncertainty about when to speak may reduce learning when students lack clear roles or strategies for entering the conversation. Similar challenges have been reported in virtual-team research, where successful interaction depends on clear coordination, manageable group structures, and appropriate facilitation (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023). Pedagogical mentoring and explicit task organization are therefore important for supporting equitable participation and preventing less-confident students from becoming marginalized during virtual exchange (O'Dowd et al., 2020).

5.4 Comparison with Previous Research

The findings align with research showing that virtual exchange can promote communication confidence, global competence, cultural curiosity, and interpersonal connection (Aquino et al., 2023;



Higgins, 2024; O'Dowd, 2021). Participants' positive evaluations, reports of cultural learning, and desire for further interaction correspond with studies showing that structured online exchange can provide meaningful opportunities to use English and develop relationships with international peers.

The present findings also reflect established ELF perspectives in which successful multilingual communication depends on intelligibility, adaptability, and cooperation rather than strict conformity to native-speaker norms (Canagarajah, 2007; Ishihara & Prado, 2021; Vettorel, 2018). The reported effects of group size, turn-taking uncertainty, and online audio conditions also correspond with research emphasizing the importance of coordination, task structure, and pedagogical mentoring in virtual exchange (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023; O'Dowd et al., 2020).

Recent virtual-exchange research similarly indicates that interaction with international peers can support intercultural learning, perspective-taking, and interpersonal connection when students are provided with structured opportunities for discussion and reflection (Aquino et al., 2023; Higgins, 2024; O'Dowd, 2021). The present study adds an India–Japan perspective to this literature by showing that multilingual Asian learners can sustain meaningful interaction despite differences in English exposure, fluency, confidence, and previous intercultural experience.

The findings also support studies demonstrating that online intercultural communication is shaped by technical conditions, group organization, and interactional coordination (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023; Huang & Lanford, 2024). Audio problems, large group size, unclear turn-taking, and limited breakout-room time affected participation in the present study. These results reinforce the argument that virtual exchange should be viewed as a carefully designed pedagogical process rather than simply an online meeting between students.

At the same time, the present study extends previous research by connecting communication difficulty, supportive interaction, shared understanding, and intercultural learning within an Asian virtual-exchange context. It suggests that communicative effectiveness should be evaluated through participants' ability to sustain interaction, respond supportively, establish relationships, and develop mutual understanding rather than through conformity to idealized native-speaker norms.

5.5 Relationship to the Earlier Study

The earlier study examined empowerment, confidence, learner agency, cultural awareness, and participants' general evaluations of the exchange (Muthumaniraja et al., 2025). The present study uses the same exchange context and dataset but addresses a different analytical problem. It focuses specifically on the communication difficulties participants experienced, the communicative resources and supportive practices that helped maintain interaction, and the ways English contributed to shared intercultural understanding.

The present analysis therefore complements rather than reproduces the earlier study. Whereas the earlier study concentrated primarily on participants' broader affective and intercultural outcomes, the present study shifts attention to the communicative conditions underlying those experiences. It examines how linguistic differences, confidence, turn-taking, group structure, visual support, and



technological conditions shaped participation. This re-focused analysis offers a more specific account of English as a shared intercultural resource in India–Japan virtual exchange.

6. Pedagogical Implications

Although clarification and repair sequences were not systematically captured in the present dataset, previous research suggests that explicit strategy instruction can better prepare learners for future virtual exchanges. Students should be prepared to communicate with diverse English users before participating in virtual exchange. Preparation should include exposure to different accents, discussion of intelligibility, and explicit instruction in clarification requests, repetition, rephrasing, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. Learners should also receive useful follow-up questions so that limited confidence does not prevent them from extending a conversation.

Planning time is particularly important for less confident speakers. Students can prepare key vocabulary, short cultural explanations, examples, and visual materials before the exchange. Topics should be culturally meaningful but should avoid presenting students as fixed representatives of national cultures.

Group design also requires careful attention. Small, balanced breakout groups are likely to provide more speaking opportunities than large groups. Teachers should assign flexible roles, establish turn-taking expectations, encourage slower speech and active listening, and make chat, pictures, slides, and shared documents available as communication support.

Assessment should prioritise communicative effectiveness, cooperation, responsiveness, and intercultural learning rather than grammatical accuracy alone. Post-exchange reflection can help students identify communication difficulties, effective strategies, cultural assumptions, and future learning goals.

A suitable instructional sequence is:

Strategy training → Cultural-topic preparation → Guided interaction → Reflection → Follow-up interaction

Repeated exchanges are preferable to isolated sessions because learners need opportunities to apply strategies, reflect on difficulties, and communicate again with greater confidence. Recent research similarly emphasises that structured preparation, teacher mediation, and sustained interaction are central to meaningful virtual-exchange outcomes (Higgins, 2024; Huang & Lanford, 2024; O'Dowd et al., 2020).

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small and drawn from one India–Japan virtual-exchange context, which limits the transferability of the findings. The exchange was conducted as a single session, and the results therefore reflect participants' immediate experiences rather than changes developing across repeated interaction. Differences in English proficiency, previous international experience, confidence, and familiarity with online communication may also have



influenced participation. In addition, the analysis relied mainly on student reflections, teacher observation notes, and researcher accounts because detailed recordings of complete interactional episodes were not available for systematic analysis. This restricted the study's ability to examine exact clarification, repair, repetition, and confirmation sequences. The researchers' involvement in organizing and observing the exchange may also have influenced interpretation. The findings should therefore not be generalized to all Indian and Japanese university students. Future studies should examine multiple exchange cycles, include larger and more diverse samples, and analyze recorded interaction in greater detail. Longitudinal research could compare pre- and post-interaction performance, trace changes in confidence and strategy use over time, and investigate whether repeated exchange leads to more effective communication management and maintenance of shared understanding. Studies involving different institutions, academic disciplines, and mixed-gender groups would also improve the breadth of evidence. Quantitative analysis of specific communication strategies could further clarify how frequently learners use clarification requests, repetition, rephrasing, confirmation checks, visual support, and peer assistance.

8. Conclusion

This study examined how Indian and Japanese university students used English during a virtual intercultural exchange. The findings indicate that English functioned as a jointly used and collaboratively shaped intercultural resource rather than as a fixed system belonging to either group. Communication was shaped by differences in pronunciation, fluency, confidence, turn-taking expectations, and technological conditions. Nevertheless, participants were able to maintain interaction through linguistic flexibility, accessible topics, visual support, patient listening, supportive responses, and a willingness to continue despite difficulty. These features show that communicative effectiveness depended less on grammatical perfection than on adaptability, cooperation, and mutual attention.

The exchange also created opportunities for cultural learning, interpersonal connection, and increased confidence in communicating with diverse English users. Students used English to explain everyday practices, compare experiences, recognize similarities, and develop positive relationships across national and linguistic boundaries. India-Japan virtual exchange therefore offers a meaningful Asian context for developing communicative and intercultural competence without relying on native-speaker norms. When carefully structured and supported, such exchanges can help learners view communication difficulty not simply as failure, but as an opportunity for adjustment, interactional support, reflection, and shared learning.

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