

---

# First-year Student Perceptions of the International Virtual Exchange

Robert Remmerswaal  
Sojo University  
robertr@m.sojo-u.ac.jp

---

This paper looks at first-year university student perceptions of the International Virtual Exchange (IVE). The IVE is a Moodle-based program where students from around the world write messages to each other in a forum. Four classes from Sojo University participated during the 2022-23 academic year. In the first semester, students sent messages on specific topics to members of an assigned group. In the second semester, students wrote freely on the topics of their choice with no groups assigned. Students were given a quantitative survey and wrote reflections at the completion of the IVE each semester. The surveys found that most students enjoyed the IVE and thought it was appropriate for their English level. Student reflections were overwhelmingly positive with only two negative comments in the first semester and five in the second semester. The main themes from the reflections were that students believed their English writing fluency, grammar, and vocabulary improved. Students also wrote that the intercultural communication was a worthwhile and enjoyable experience.

この論文は、International Virtual Exchange (IVE)に大学1年生の対する学生の認識について考察したものである。IVEはMoodleを利用したプログラムで、世界中の学生がフォーラムを通じ、互いにメッセージを書き込むものである。2022-23年度に崇城大学から4クラスが参加した。前期は、特定のトピックについて、指定されたグループのメンバーにメッセージを送った。後期は、グループ分けをせず、自分の好きなテーマで自由に文章を書いた。各学期のIVE終了時に、学生に定量的なアンケートを実施し、振り返りを書いた。アンケートの結果、殆どの学生がIVEを楽しみ、自身の英語力レベルに適していると考えていることが明らかとなった。学生の感想文は圧倒的に肯定的なものが多く、否定的な回答は前期に2つ、後期に5つだけであった。感想文の主なテーマは、英語の流暢さ、文法、語彙が向上したと学生が考えていることであった。また、異文化コミュニケーションは有意義で楽しい経験であったと書かれていた。

---

## Introduction

The International Virtual Exchange (IVE) is an online community of students who interact in a Moodle forum. Students are registered by their instructors for eight-week sessions. Each instructor encourages weekly participation and designs their own assessment criteria. The IVE was organized by Eric Hagley in 2005 and through a *Kaken* grant in 2015, it expanded to host thousands of students from a variety of countries (Hagley, 2020). Virtual exchange is a powerful way to improve the language skills of students as it provides authentic opportunities to use English and to learn from other students around the world (Hagley, 2016).

The IVE was introduced during the pandemic when 14 of the 30 English Communication 1 and 2 (EC1, EC2) classes at Sojo University were conducted in an on-demand format, the others were held face-to-face. Students completed the on-demand classes asynchronously throughout the week on their own schedule. The researcher used the IVE for a portion of the on-demand classes. One reason the instructor utilized the IVE was that it met the ten criteria of an authentic task as summarized by Reeves et al. (2002) in reference to numerous social constructivist authors. The most relevant criteria were that the IVE has real

world relevance as the written interactions are similar to many forum-like platforms such as Redditt, Twitter, Slack or Basecamp. Second, students work in groups to share their own cultures and learn about other cultures. Finally, students all have different outcomes from each other as they are interacting with different students on different topics with different English proficiency levels.

Another reason for using the IVE was to provide students a chance to write about the topics used in the face-to-face classes. In summarizing the findings of several studies, Jackson (2022) found that learners may use their L2 differently in speaking versus writing and that learners should have opportunities to demonstrate their L2 abilities in different modes, at different times, in authentically meaningful ways. The slower paced interactions in the IVE allow students to use external resources, like dictionaries, and allow more time to process the communication inputs and their outputs. By using the same topics in writing and speaking tasks, students would have the opportunity to draw on the vocabulary and grammar they used in the IVE in the classroom discussions.

In 2019, Hagley and Cotter (2019) conducted a survey with the Japanese and Columbian IVE participants. Participation was voluntary and spanned several institutions in both countries. Both sets of students reported that the IVE aided in their language learning and understanding of other cultures. Students strongly stated that their views of partner countries had changed, now felt English was important, and had a higher interest in other cultures. In a similar study, Hagley (2020) summarized the survey results of the Japanese participants from various institutions from two instances of using the IVE. In both instances, students reported an increase in intercultural sensitivity, appreciation of other cultures, interactional confidence, and motivation to learn English.

In those studies, the participants were from several different universities and the English ability of students was not discussed. Additionally, these survey participants were likely being evaluated differently, as the IVE had no guidelines or requirements for how instructors should assess participation in the IVE. This study explores student perceptions and reflections on the IVE in the context of Sojo University students receiving 8-10% of their score from their participation in the IVE. In particular, the study looks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do students at Sojo University perceive the IVE as appropriate (or inappropriate) for their English level?
2. What do Sojo University students view as positive outcomes (or drawbacks) of using the IVE?

## **Methods**

To answer these questions both qualitative and quantitative data was collected. The researcher answers the first question with the quantitative data from a Likert survey as well as the participation data from EC1 and EC2. The second question is answered with the qualitative data from the student reflections in EC1 and EC2. The methods for gathering student information, the IVE tasks, and scoring methods are described for both semesters.

### ***Semester 1***

#### ***Student Tasks***

In the first semester, 7168 students were enrolled worldwide in the IVE. This included 107 of the researcher's students from Pharmaceutical Sciences (Pharm), Aerospace Systems and Mechanical Engineering (AeroMec), Applied Microbial Technology and Applied Life Science (BioLife), and Computer and Information Sciences (CIS). Most students were at an assumed CEFR A2 level, with a few Pharm and AeroMec students at a B1 level. These

students were assigned to groups with approximately 15 other students. The IVE opened one discussion topic every two weeks. There was a total of four topics, spanning eight weeks. The researcher gave students a score for each topic worth 2% of their final score, for a total of 8% as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*IVE Semester 1 Scoring*

<b>Score</b>	<b>Type and number of posts</b>
6/10	Single post
7/10	Two posts (three or more without a picture)
8/10	Three posts or more (with a picture)
9/10	Three posts or more (with a picture and one post with five or more sentences)
10/10	Same as 9/10 but must also have responded to the replies of two people within the same topic.

Every two weeks, students received a score out of 10. At the end of eight weeks, students had a total score out of 40 and were given two additional weeks to increase their score by posting in the Open Forum of the IVE. Students received 1 bonus point for each post but could only use bonus points to achieve a maximum score of 75% in the IVE.

*EC1 Reflection and Survey*

Students were required to write a reflection on their experience with the IVE after the additional two weeks for bonus points had concluded. The instructions were given as follows:

“You sent messages to students using the IVE website over the last 8-10 weeks. What did you think about the experience? Did it get easier with time? Did you make any friendships? Did your English improve? Did your technology skills improve? What did you learn from others? Is there anything you would change? This is your reflection. Write anything good or bad about the IVE. 120 words recommended.”

At the end of the first semester, students ranked their enjoyment and the difficulty of several assignment types from the semester, including the IVE. Students ranked their level of enjoyment using a 6-point Likert scale, from *definitely did not enjoy* to *definitely did enjoy*. Students ranked the appropriateness of the task’s difficulty on a 7-point Likert scale from it was *definitely too easy* to it was *definitely too hard*. The middle scale item was labeled as *this activity was the correct difficulty*. The survey was conducted in Japanese and the results were translated to English for this paper.

**Semester 2**

*Student Tasks*

In the second semester, the IVE had a total of 5660 students enrolled: 82 of whom were students from the researcher’s BioLife, CIS, and Pharm classes. The students in these classes had all participated in the IVE in the first semester. The IVE administrators changed the program so that students were no longer given topics or groups. The IVE was now focused on the Open Forum, where students could choose to post about any topic with anyone at any time. The researcher changed the scoring to match this new format by using a summative score with the criteria seen in Table 2.

**Table 2***IVE Semester 2 Scoring*

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Points</i>	<i>Maximum score</i>
Post your introduction video	1	Finished or not finished
Make many posts	3	Maximum score is 18 posts
Write many words	4	Maximum score is 400 words
Use pictures or videos	2	Maximum score is 4 media posts

After eight and a half weeks, the researcher closed the IVE and gave a score to the students based on the stated criteria. There was no option for bonus points. While the IVE was open, students saw their progress several times on the class projector and were taught how to read the dashboard at the top of the IVE homepage.

*EC2 Reflection*

Once the IVE was closed, students were asked for a different kind of reflection. “Should first year students use the IVE next year or should they have more ZenGengo activities?” This question was asked because ZenGengo is very different from the IVE. The IVE is open to interpretation and was assessed based on participation criteria. ZenGengo, as the researcher used in these classes, was a series of reading and vocabulary activities that were auto graded. The same five lesson types were repeated across 50 topics. Students completed these ZenGengo activities at their own pace throughout the semester. The researcher believed that comparing these very different activity types would expand the student answers beyond “yes” or “no”.

*Reflection Review Process*

The researcher read all the reflections several times and summarized what was written into categories, such as grammar improved, fluency improved, learned about a new culture. These categories were then combined into themes when centered on a similar topic. For example, improvements in fluency and grammar are both part of the theme of improving English. After sorting all the reflections into these themes, the researcher repeated the process to add to the reliability of results.

*Ethical Considerations*

Student names and identifying information were not used in this research paper. Student reflections were part of the EC1 and EC2 course and received a score. As explained to the students, the researcher gave a score for any opinion that was written with higher scores given when supporting rationale or an example was provided. At the end of EC1, during the course survey, students were asked for consent on using their reflection data for research purposes. Only the quotes from students who consented are used in this paper. Participation data were collected from all students in the researcher’s EC1 and EC2 classes. Ethical approval was obtained from Sojo University.

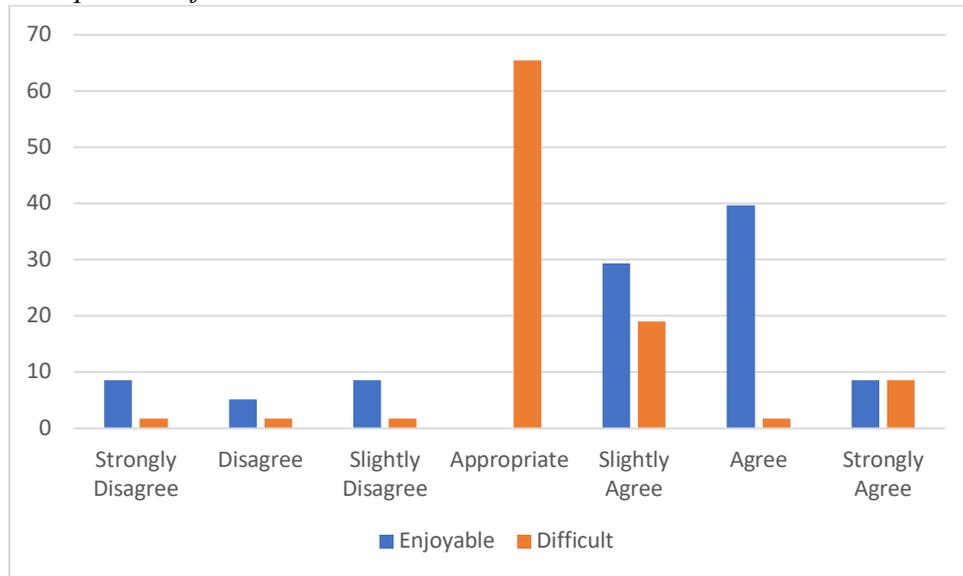
**Results***Likert Survey and Participation*

Figure 1 shows student perceived enjoyment and difficulty of the IVE. A total of 58 students responded to the survey at the end of EC1. The data for enjoyable was converted from the 6-point Likert scale, *definitely did not enjoy* to *definitely did enjoy*, while the difficulty data came from the 7-point Likert scale, *definitely too easy* to it was *definitely too hard*. The item *Appropriate* in Figure 1 only applies to the 7-Point difficulty scale. 77.6% responded that the

IVE was *slightly to strongly enjoyable*. For difficulty, 65.5% of respondents felt the IVE was appropriately difficult, however 19% felt it was slightly too difficult for them.

**Figure 1**

*Student opinions of the IVE*



In the first semester, over half the students chose not to complete the reflection, despite it being assessed. Many students who completed the reflection scored well on the IVE, but there were several students who scored poorly who completed the reflection as well. To better understand how actively engaged students were with the IVE, Table 3 shows the total the total number of students enrolled in the IVE, those who participated with a score above 0% (indicating at least one post), and those who passed with a score of 60% or higher (demonstrating repeated posts). The numbers in brackets for Passed and Final Reflection represent the number of students in those categories as a percentage of those who participated.

**Table 3**

*Student Participation in the IVE*

	Class Total	Participated	Passed (60%+)	Final Reflection
EC1	107	104	68 (65%)	51 (49%)
EC2	82	79	57 (72%)	63 (80%)

The total number of students in EC2 who were enrolled in the IVE was lower than in EC1 as AeroMec was not a part of the IVE in EC2. However, the percentage of students who received a passing score increased. Similarly, a higher percentage of students completed the reflection.

### **EC1 Reflection**

From the student reflections, the researcher identified four major themes, with three reflections categorized in two themes each. The main theme was that students perceived an improvement in their English ability, as can be seen in Table 4. The researcher made minor changes to spelling and grammar of student reflections as quoted below.

**Table 4***Student Reflection Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Count</b>
English Skills Improved	33
Culture	16
Made Friends	3
Hate English	2

The theme of English Skills Improved included a variety of reflections. Responses ranged from short answers to long paragraphs. Many students described improvement in one or more area connected to their writing fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. The theme is best captured by one BioLife student:

At first I was reluctant to send a message in English because I am not very good at English. But over time I got used to sending messages... I also think that my English skills have improved. I learned how to use grammar by reading other person's sentences.

An AeroMec student said something very similar:

There were many things which I don't know how to say in English and also I couldn't use correct English grammar. So the opportunity gave me chance to study English grammar and to learn English word.

In the reflections, many students wrote how they were exposed to other cultures for the first time. These comments were always positive and often included the words "enjoyment" or "fun" in their description. Students also wrote of the great opportunity of the IVE. One CIS student summarizes it well: "Through the IVE project, I was first of all surprised at how easy it is to connect with people from other countries [...] I learned a new how vast the world is." A pharmacy student had a similar thought:

I think that this action is so fun and so interesting. When I was junior high school and high school student, I did not like English so much. This is because I felt English class is not interesting. When we studied English, we cannot speak English with other people. We just write, listen, and read back off English sentences. But, IVE project can (connect with) many people who live in other countries, and they teach me about them countries. It is so good information for me. Now, I like to study and talk with English. I am able to feel fun and interesting using English. When I will be working adult, I want to go many countries, that my pen friends is living.

Another pharmacy student spoke to the benefits of using the IVE as a way to overcome their difficulty with speaking:

I think that this experience is very valuable and important. It was hard for me to talk in English. It was harder to think about a long sentence, and to talk. I can't talk well in high school English class. But in IVE, I was not nervous because conversation is through chat. I can know foreign culture through conversation.

The student who wrote that they hate English still managed to learn from the experience.

I learned to express my opinion in English at IVE. For me IVE been very difficult. However, I was able to learn about the cultures of people from various countries. I hate IVE very much. Because I'm not good at writing English. So I don't want to (do it)... I want to study English vocabulary and grammar so that I can write in English. Lastly, I think English is very difficult.

These quotes capture the feelings that many of the students expressed for the IVE. Unlike other activities in previous English classes, the IVE was an interesting way to communicate with students from other countries and improve their English writing skills. At times students had difficulty with expressing themselves, but they overcame and learned from that difficulty. For many students, this was their first time interacting with people from another culture who were not their teacher.

### ***EC2 Reflection***

Of the 82 students enrolled in the IVE, 79 participated, with one student from each class not making a single post. The numbers in brackets in Table 5 beside each class name represent the total number of students in that class who participated in the IVE.

**Table 5**  
*Student Reflections in EC2*

	<i>For IVE</i>	<i>Against IVE</i>	<i>No response</i>
CIS (26)	18	2	7
BioLife (27)	18	1	9
Pharm (26)	22	2	3

The reflection was scored based on students providing a rationale for their opinion. All three classes had very similar responses and were very much in favor of the IVE being used in subsequent years. The most common reason students recommended using the IVE was due to the “unique opportunity” or “rare experience” of interacting with and learning about other cultures. The second most common reason was the IVE was a great way to improve grammar and vocabulary. The final reason students gave was that the IVE is “fun” or “enjoyable”. The few students who opposed using the IVE wrote that English is difficult, SNS is not fun, and it can take a long time to receive a response from other students. Overall, student responses came across as thankful that the IVE was assigned to them.

### **Discussion**

There are limitations to this study. First, many students in EC1 chose not to complete the reflection or the survey. Second, all the qualitative data were reviewed by a single researcher, who was also the instructor. There is likely to be some bias in the categorization and interpretation of the results. Finally, as coursework, the reflections may not represent the true feelings of the students. While students were told they were being marked for providing an opinion and supporting rationale, students may have believed that a positive review could result in a higher score.

To determine if the IVE was the correct difficulty, the researcher looked at the Likert data and student participation rates in the IVE. In the Likert survey, most students felt the IVE was appropriately levelled. However, nearly a third of students ranked the IVE between *slightly* and *definitely too hard*. There was little rationale given for this in the reflections. One student who mentioned that writing was difficult also mentioned they had learned about different cultures and how to express their opinion in English. This indicates that even if a

student dislikes the IVE and finds it difficult that they can still learn from the experience. Nearly 80% of respondents found the IVE enjoyable, meaning some of the students who felt it was too difficult still felt it was enjoyable. From this Likert data, the IVE was appropriately leveled for the participants in the survey.

The rates at which students participated in the IVE are another indication of the appropriateness of the task. In both semesters a few students did not use the IVE at all, which was common with other on-demand activities in those classes. There was also a significant percent of students who did not receive a passing score in the IVE. This indicates that some aspect of the IVE was likely too difficult. In EC1, only 65% of students passed the IVE. Student reflections also had a low completion rate at 49%. In EC2, 72% of students passed the IVE, an increase of 7%, and 80% of students completed the reflection. This increase in the pass rate of EC2 could indicate that English proficiency was not the sole contributor to the lower pass rate of EC1 as student writing proficiency was unlikely to change significantly between semesters.

The change in pass rate could be due to the change in the IVE format or the removal of one class from the IVE, but this is unlikely. The format of the IVE changed between EC1 and EC2, but the tasks were very similar and EC1 had an additional two weeks to receive bonus points. EC1 also included AeroMec, a class that had a much higher average score on the English placement test administered at the beginning of EC1. The AeroMec students were the most likely to have found the IVE appropriately levelled or too easy. The increase in the IVE pass rate was likely due to familiarity with the class structure, the teacher, or the IVE itself. This may indicate that some students require more scaffolding or support with the IVE in order to use it regularly.

The positive outcomes of the IVE written in the student reflections were most often related to an increase in writing speed or fluency, an increase in grammatical knowledge, an increase in vocabulary, a new understanding of other cultures, and to a lesser extent the ability to make friends. Students wrote that the increased fluency came from the repetition of writing posts each week. Students from each class wrote that they improved their grammar from reading the IVE posts of other students. This was a surprise to the researcher as grammar was not taught or reviewed in the classroom. The reported increase in vocabulary was an expected result of the IVE as students were exposed to many different posts from many different students of varying English ability. A few students also wrote that this experience increased their motivation to learn English, which is similar to the responses of Japanese students in previous studies (Hagley & Cotter, 2019; Hagley, 2020).

Learning about other cultures was another positive outcome found in this study. It was the top reason for students recommending the IVE be used in subsequent years. In the studies reviewed above, the IVE expanded student understanding of other cultures, changed student views of other cultures, and gave an appreciation of other cultures (Hagley & Cotter, 2019; Hagley, 2020). Students at Sojo University wrote that they had learned about other cultures and that it was enjoyable, without giving more details. It is unclear if students changed their views of different cultures or gained a new appreciation for the cultures of the other students in the IVE.

The only drawback reported by a minority of students was the difficulty of the IVE. From two of the comments, this difficulty could be connected to a dislike of English writing. Students who participated intermittently and who did not complete the survey may have found aspects of the IVE difficult as well. Students were onboarded and given an example of how to write their first post in a face-to-face class at the beginning of each semester. Subsequent topics were completed by students during the on-demand classes. Providing class time in the face-to-face classes or providing examples for each topic may have increased student pass rates of the IVE or changed perceptions of its difficulty.

## Conclusion

Previous research found the IVE increases Japanese student perceptions of language learning; interactional confidence; motivation to learn English; and increased understanding, appreciation, sensitivity, and interest towards other cultures (Hagley & Cotter, 2019; Hagley, 2020). These studies did not include the student English level or the way in which students were evaluated. This paper included mostly CEFR A2 level students receiving no more than 10% of their final score from the IVE. Students reported that their English writing fluency, grammar skills, and their vocabulary increased. Students also reported enjoying the intercultural communication and the chance to speak with students from another culture for the first time. Some students found the IVE difficult, but further research is needed to understand what was difficult and how to better support students in those areas. The IVE provided an authentic writing exchange with students around the world that was beneficial for most if not all participants at Sojo University.

## References

- Hagley, E. (2016). Making virtual exchange/telecollaboration mainstream—large scale exchanges. In *New directions in telecollaborative research and practice: selected papers from the second conference on telecollaboration in higher education* (pp. 225-230). <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.telecollab2016.511>
- Hagley, E. (2020). Linking the world's EFL classrooms: The IVE project. *The Language Teacher*, 44(5). <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTTLT44.5>
- Hagley, E., & Cotter, M. (2019). Virtual exchange supporting language and intercultural development: students' perceptions. *CALL and complexity—short papers from EUROCALL*, 163-168. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.38.1003>
- Jackson, D. O. (2022). *Task-Based Language Teaching* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009067973>
- Reeves, T.C., Herrington, J., & Oliver, R. (2002). Authentic activities and online learning. In A. Goody, J. Herrington, & M. Northcote (Eds.), *Quality conversations: Research and Development in Higher Education*, Volume 25 (pp. 562-567)

崇城大学 SILC 紀要

SILC Journal

---

2023 年 2 月 2 日

Copyright (C) Feb. 6, 2023  
by Sojo International Learning Center, Sojo University

編集・発行

崇城大学 Sojo International Learning Center  
〒860-0082 熊本市西区池田 4 丁目 22-1

印刷・製本

崇城大学 出版センター