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Using English for Academic Purposes to improve students' research skills in global project-based learning teams

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This research project involved several online intercultural exchanges between students in Japan, China, Indonesia, and Germany. The focus of the online exchanges was to improve research skills through English by 1) posing research questions about emic cultural concepts, 2) trying to understand the concepts through academic readings and discussion, 3) writing academic papers about them, and 4) reflecting on the concepts. Emic cultural concepts are native or indigenous to cultures and are usually difficult to understand in other cultural contexts. For example, in Japanese, such concepts are: wa, honne / tatemae, and amae. Most of the students were able to successfully improve their English research skills by discussing these concepts with their international counterparts. The students not only improved their research skills but realized transcultural understanding when they were able to successfully agree upon translations of the concepts in their native languages through English.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Online Exchanges Transculturality Exploratory Practice TeamLearning Folk Psychology Emic cultural concepts Interculturality EFL

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The Internet has made telecommunication possible throughout the world; for example, people can communicate virtually through computers, tablets, and smartphones with various communication applications for video conferencing calls. This is especially relevant nowadays with the coronavirus pandemic, which makes it almost impossible to travel abroad and meet people from other countries face-to-face. However, when people from different cultural backgrounds have to work together, many issues, difficulties, and misunderstandings involving communication may arise because of differences in cultural values.

Indigenous psychology is a type of psychology that focuses on *emic* or specific cultural features of a culture that play a key role in understanding the values, characteristics, and communication styles of a particular culture (Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006). The current research project was based on learning about emic cultural keywords through discussions about students' own folk psychologies (Bruner, 1990), or common understandings of the cultural emic concepts in their own words, using telecommunication Internet-based applications.

Additionally, because the learning involved using English as a common language, a pedagogy commonly used in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) was employed in this research; namely, Exploratory Practice (EP) (Hanks, 2017). In EP, students are positioned as "practitioner researchers" and students are empowered to develop their own research questions and seek methods to approach them with the guidance of their teachers and in collaboration with their teachers. Moreover, as the teachers of the learning teams were from different cultural backgrounds, an approach called Team Learning (Stewart, Dalsky, and Tajino, 2019), was also used. In this approach, students are learning from teachers, teachers are learning from students, and teachers are even learning from students—in this research project, about emic cultural concepts.

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The purpose of this research was to use the aforementioned pedagogies and the discipline of indigenous psychology to improve students' research skills in English with global project-based learning teams. Teachers and students collaborated in small teams in four countries: Japan, Indonesia, China, and Germany to discuss their research questions regarding emic concepts that were based initially on keywords for understanding Japanese psychology (Dalsky & Su, 2020). See Table 1 for a list of examples of emic concepts and the translations that were discussed.

Table 1: Examples of key emic cultural concepts

Japanese* concepts	English translation	Chinese concepts	Indonesian concepts	German concepts
甘え	presumed indulgence	撒娇，发嗲	manja, manying	[Nachsicht; Zuwendung] [er]heischen
本音/建前	true feelings/overt behavior	真心话/场面话	sekenan	wahre Gesinnung/zur Schau getragene Gesinnung, Fassade
集団意識	group consciousness	集体主义	awig	Kollektivbewußtsein, Gruppenbewußtsein
和	harmony	和	adung	Harmonie; Einigkeit; Übereinstimmung
義理/恩	obligation/ duty	人情/恩	swadarma	sittliche Pflicht/Gnade, Gunst
面子	face	面子	mua	Gesicht; Ansehen; Ruf
曖昧	ambiguity	曖昧，含糊	gabeng, saru	Unbestimmtheit; Vagheit
恥	shame	羞耻，羞愧，耻辱	klincutan, lekati	Blamage; Schmähung; Scham

The basic methodology of the research project (See Figure 1 below):

Step 1: Students relied on folk psychology and read some articles about the emic cultural concepts with the guidance of teachers.

Step 2: Students collaborated to pose research questions regarding the key cultural concepts with their international counterparts, which is an essential principle of Exploratory Practice.

Step 3: The features of the indigenous cultural concepts (folk psychologies) were pursued through online intercultural exchanges and interviews of using online tools and applications such as Google Drive, LINE, WeChat, WhatsApp, Skype, Messages, and FaceTime.

Step 4: Students wrote about the concepts. Writings sometimes led to the emergence of team members' mutual transcultural understanding in the value-centered version of Team Learning (i.e., Tajino & Smith, 2016).

Step 5: Students and the researchers completed open-ended surveys about reflections on mutual transcultural understandings.

Figure 1: Methodology
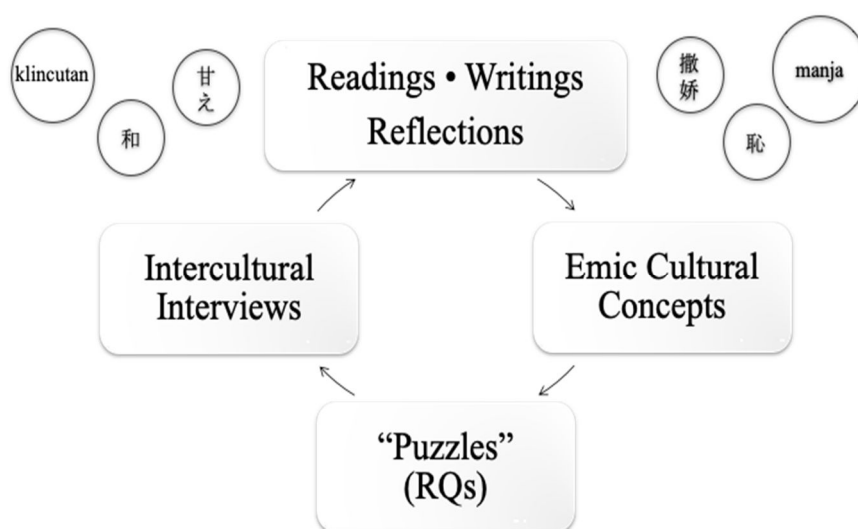
A selection of the written products of the online intercultural exchanges can be found on https://interculturalwordsensei.org/. Anonymous students' reflections from the online intercultural exchanges that demonstrate some insights into the success of the project regarding the online intercultural collaborative research process (used with the students' consent) are as follows:

Japanese students:

(1) "It was the first time for me to communicate with German students via LINE. It was a good experience for me. I was shocked how poor my English was."

(2) "At this time, I am so happy that I could learn a lot about Germany. I have never talked with foreign people, so this is a wonderful experience."

(3) "I was surprised at German's questions because they don't understand *amae* at all. I realized *amae* is a unique Japanese expression. It was interesting that there are a lot of differences between Japan and other countries."

German students:

(1) "I learned about the other culture, because the Japanese way of life and thinking is very different from ours and it was very interesting to learn more about their values."

(2) "I found it very exciting to get an insight into Japanese culture through the communication and the interview. By directly speaking to Japanese, cultural differences and particularities became much clearer than through just reading. Moreover, I think that by using this method actively what I have learned will stick better in my memory."

(3) "I learned about intercultural interaction and the contact to one of my interview partners is still actual. We still communicate over LINE."

Chinese students:

(1) "We all would like to know about each other's culture and languages, and also by intercultural exchange we can know more about our own culture."

(2) "I hadn't used Skype or other platforms to chat by video with someone I only know on Internet. But it turned out that the intercultural exchange went smoothly and it was fascinating!"

(3) "We all feel that intercultural communication is necessary to broaden our horizons and also important for understand our own culture."

Indonesian students:

(1) "Talking about local language, every unique cultural background and the context of the situation hardly allows for perfect translation. It's better to learn the word and its meaning directly rather than to translate into other words."

(2) "In the discussion, I realized that each language has their own meaning and context. Learning and sharing language is not only about the meaning, but also learning and sharing about the context of it."

(3) "For me, the important key to build an online relationship is the willingness to contact more intensively. Another key to have good relationships with virtual partners is keep the relation flowing with an understanding of the different backgrounds."

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