

This work is licensed
under a Creative
Commons Attribution
4.0 International
License.

Exploring the virtual exchange experiences of university students in Japan with partners in the Philippines

 **Andrew G. P. Nowlan**

Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan
anowlan@kwansei.ac.jp

 **Michael Wilkins**

Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan
michaelwilkins@kwansei.ac.jp

The role of virtual exchange (VE) and collaborative online international learning (COIL) has shifted from a replacement for study abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic to a means of preparation and support for international programs today. Learning more about the experiences of Japanese university students with VE could help stakeholders at higher education institutions in Japan meet the objectives of current internationalization initiatives, including participation in overseas study. This pilot study aims to identify the essence of experience shared by 12 university students in Japan using a modification of Moustakas's (1994) descriptive phenomenological framework. The participants completed a VE during the first half of 2024 with participants at two universities in Mindanao, the Philippines. Drawing on data from pre- and post-intervention surveys, journaling, and reflective interviews, analysis yielded three clusters of meaning: (a) ELF motivation; (b) reconciling anxiety and comfort during communication; and (c) operationalizing and developing intercultural competences. The VE experience was valuable for all participants, regardless of study abroad intent. Research outcomes will contribute to a corresponding full-scale study examining the role of COIL with partners in Southeast Asia and its impact on study abroad participation.

Keywords: COIL, higher education, internationalisation, phenomenology, virtual learning

Introduction and literature review

In the early 2020s, the COVID-19 pandemic thrust higher education institutions around the world into a position of accelerating computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Smith, 2021). While certain educators and institutions continue to adopt and

adapt CALL into their curriculum during this post-pandemic era (Huang & Kurata, 2024), a disconnect remains between CALL capabilities and current internationalization policy in Japan's higher education sector. Upon the 2023 completion of a decade-long flagship internationalization initiative – the Top Global University Project (TGUP) – the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) launched the *Support Project for Creating Social Impact through the Internationalization of Universities* in 2024 to drive “high-level university knowledge abroad” (MEXT, 2024, p. 4) while announcing a Future Education program to send over 500,000 students abroad annually by 2033 (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2023). Government decision makers continue to disregard the potential of virtual exchanges and internationalization-at-home in favor of physical study abroad quotas.

The current pilot study aims to generate insight into the potential of virtual exchange (VE) and collaborative online international learning (COIL) as a tool to bridge the gap between Japan's ambitious study abroad targets and a student body that is reluctant to study abroad, due to factors such as second-language anxiety (Nowlan, 2020), perceived second-language deficits (Nowlan, 2024), and costs (Kobayashi, 2018).

Virtual exchange and COIL in Japan

The terms “VE” and “COIL” are often used interchangeably in the parlance of international education; however, there are notable differences between the two, regarding scope of engagement and collaboration. While COIL is defined by the author's institution as a course that is composed of at least 30% online interactions and collaboration, VE involves more isolated interactions where students from different countries can exchange culture and opinions (SUNY COIL Center, 2020). The implementation of COIL and VE at Japanese universities has grown rapidly over the last decade, accelerated by pandemic-era travel restrictions, technological advancement, and proactive support by MEXT to foster internationalization. (Radjai & Hammond, 2024). For the exploratory purposes of the current pilot study and to continue expanding the body of literature on VE and COIL in Japan, the researchers conducted a VE; however, a later full-scale study will involve experiences with COIL.

Virtual collaborations between Japan and the Philippines

There is a lack of studies done in Japan exploring VE and COIL experiences with partners in Southeast Asia, specifically in the Philippines. One study by Chu and Torii (2021) looked at a COIL project, involving university students in Japan and the Philippines, from a non-phenomenological approach and concluded that the COIL project improved students' intercultural competences. To contribute to these findings, a phenomenological approach is well suited to yield impressions of experience, similar to studies involving other pairings of nationalities. For instance, in one project between partners in the Philippines and Indonesia, students experienced a range of outcomes, including the development of macro skills, digital literacies, and 21st-century skills (Francisco, 2022). The assimilation of 21st-century skills through international VE, such as intercultural communication and problem-solving abilities,

was also found amongst students in Europe (Sierra et al., 2022) and those in South Africa (Msekela, 2023).

Research aims and question

This pilot study, focused on a single VE between the Philippines and Japan, was designed to inform a larger study examining COIL between university students in Japan and those across Southeast Asia and its impact on study abroad intent. Here, we address the following phenomenological-based research question through the lens of current internationalization initiatives:

- What do students at a university in Japan experience during VE with partners in the Philippines, and how do they experience it?

Methodology

Research environment and participants

Situated in the Kansai region of Japan's most populous island, pseudonymously named Hanshin International University (HIU) is a large, private university that provided the setting for this research. HIU has been the recipient of federal funding for internationalization initiatives, including the TGUP, mentioned previously. The study involved 12 HIU students enrolled across a range of majors and programs (see Table 1). While the participants' year of study and program varied, they all tested as independent users of English on the CEFR scale, and were between 19 and 24 years old. Participants were drawn from two different classes who completed identical VE programs with partners at two different universities in Mindanao, the Philippines. Over the course of two months during the 2024 spring semester, the VE consisted of posting an introductory video on the digital platform called Padlet (padlet.com), writing at least three comments, and participating in a 90-minute Zoom (zoom.us) meeting with the partner university via rotating discussion circles. The themes of the Zoom meetings included expanded self-introductions, culture sharing, and the validity of stereotypes often held of Japan and the Philippines. Those who volunteered to join the study and gave informed consent completed a background survey, a journal following the Zoom meeting, a post-intervention survey, and a reflective interview. After the data collection process, the authors used MAXQDA24 (maxqda.com) to organize, code, and compare all data sets, per the adopted phenomenological framework.



JALTCALL
Trends
Vol. 2 No. 1
2025 JALTCALL
Conference Papers
Special Issue

Table 1. List of Participants' Biographical Data

Pseudonym	Gender	Study year	English level	Study major
Aiko	Female	2nd	B2	International
Rina	Female	2nd	B1	Business
Kenta	Male	2nd	B1	Sociology
Satoshi	Male	1st	B1	Economics
Mei	Female	1st	B1	Law
Ryo	Male	1st	B1	Economics
Nozomi	Female	3rd	B1	Law
Emiko	Female	3rd	B1	Humanities
Daichi	Male	2nd	B2	Education
Hina	Female	Grad	B1	Education
Sakura	Female	Grad	B2	Education
Hiroshi	Male	Grad	B1	Education

Moustakas's (1994) descriptive phenomenology: Data collection and analysis

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach and research method designed to identify the common, lived experiences that participants have of a particular phenomenon, with focus on conscious manifestations of the phenomenon, as opposed to interpretations of the researcher (Beck, 2021). This particular study followed Moustakas's (1994) descriptive phenomenology, as modified by Yüksel & Yıldırım (2015). This framework was chosen due to its strong fit with lived experience, its suitability with a small sample, and its structured yet flexible process. As seen in Figure 1, the prescribed three-phase framework follows a rigorous process of data analysis. The initial *phenomenological reduction* phase, as seen in steps (1) to (5), involves listing data sources for individual participants then eliminating redundancies, forming clusters of meaning, and composing textural descriptions of *what* was experienced by each participant. The second phase of *imagination variation* (steps 6 and 7) aims to discover *how* the phenomenon was experienced through the crafting of individual structural descriptions and comparing these across participants. After identifying similar experience amongst participants, the final phase is identifying (8) an essence of experience, that is, commonalities across all participants as informed by both the textural and structural descriptions. As a backdrop of the whole process, researchers practice epoche, or bracketing, where researcher bias and pre-conceived notions are constantly questioned as to minimize influence on the reporting of participant experience.

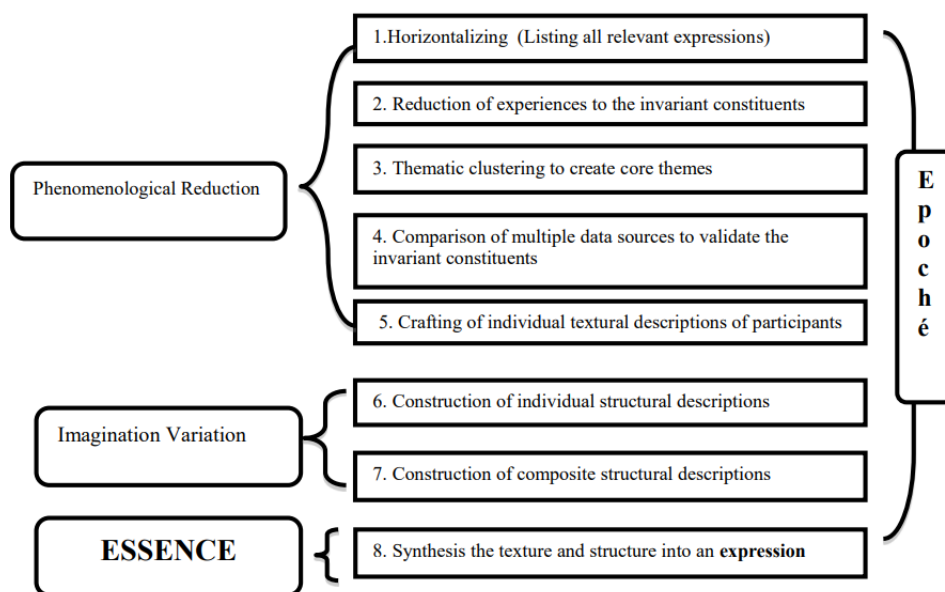


Figure 1. Modification of Moustakas' (1994) transcendental framework (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015)

Findings

After executing the analytical process described in Figure 1, the researchers were able to identify three clusters of meaning related to the phenomenon of VE with partners located in the Philippines.

Cluster 1: ELF acquisition and motivation

When comparing motivation to use English outside of classroom before and after the VE, participants who initially expressed varying degrees of apathy in the background survey cited greater levels motivation in the post-intervention phase. Participant responses included, “this made me want to communicate more with foreigners in the future” (Aiko) to “I wish I were as fluent as they were” (Nozomi). These comments suggest the following of Dörnyei’s L2 motivational self-system, including the ideal L2 self (desire for further communication) to ought-to L2 self (feelings of obligation to be as fluent as other interlocutors) (Dörnyei, 2005). Mei claimed that the COIL program “was a stimulating time for me in terms of practicing English conversation with other non-native speakers,” a broadly shared sentiment that underscores the value of communication with interlocutors who use different varieties of English.

Cluster 2: Reconciliation of anxiety and comfort in communication

Emiko echoed a concern by all participants in the pre-intervention stage by claiming, “I am worried about if I will be able to speak English well,”; however, greater comfort was widely reported following the intervention. For instance, Satoshi highlighted a shared understanding with the Filipino students, stating, “we sometimes both struggled with communicating in English, but we cooperated to help each

other understand, and this helped us feel comfortable.” Despite using a variety of English that is not considered as inner-circle or “native” (Kachru, 1992), the Japanese students could feel a strong connection to their partners, as Mei claimed that “the Filipino students were very friendly and easy to talk to,” while Sakura noted the importance of establishing rapport, acknowledging that “there were challenges in being understood and some technical glitches that were tough to deal with, but we could develop a good relationship.” This perspective reinforces the idea that while VE has limitations, it serves as a valuable tool for enhancing English proficiency and cultural understanding.

Cluster 3: Operationalizing and developing intercultural competences

Several participants highlighted the importance of understanding cultural differences between Japan and the Philippines and developing skills to communicate across cultures. Based on Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural competences, participants operationalized existing traits, such as “they were impressed that I knew the greeting ‘mabuhay’” (Kenta). Participants also noted the development of intercultural competences, including *attitude*; “I became even more interested in Filipino culture through this exchange” (Aiko) and *knowledge*; “I could get a deeper understanding of the Philippines” (Nozomi). Skills of discovery, interaction, interpreting, and relating were also evident in the data; for instance, Hiroshi claimed that “the experience helped me convey my thoughts while realizing and respecting that cultural differences exist between us.”

Discussion and implications

During VE with partners in the Philippines, 12 university students in Japan experienced increased motivation to study and utilize English in ELF environments with decreased anxiety and greater comfort (i.e., the “what”). They experienced this through the operationalization and development of intercultural competences (i.e., the “how”), which enable more confident and meaningful engagement during VE. This essence of experience points to the potential of VE and COIL in the field of English language acquisition, as all participants expressed a desire to improve their language skills through further discourse.

In the early stages of the study, Sakura’s frustration with communication barriers and Aiko’s realization of her conversational shortcomings illustrate the challenges faced by learners. However, both also highlight a strong motivation to engage more deeply with the language, as seen in Sakura’s determination to “study English harder” and Aiko’s acknowledgment of her need to enhance her conversational skills. These outcomes reflect those of studies in other global contexts (Francisco, 2022; Sierra et al., 2022; Msekela, 2023).

The experience of communicating in English elicited mixed feelings of anxiety and comfort. While many participants felt nervous about their language proficiency, they found reassurance in interacting with fellow learners, which fostered a supportive learning environment. Second-language anxiety is widely experienced amongst university students in Japan (Nowlan & Fritz, 2022; Nowlan, 2024), though

it was notable to see how the Filipino partners put the Japanese participants at ease. Facilitating the feelings of motivation, comfort, and intercultural learning is the role of relationship building, as participants often noted the friendliness and openness of Filipino students. In emphasizing developments in intercultural competences through VE, participants showed a growing interest in Filipino culture and broadened cultural horizons, suggesting that language learning is not merely about vocabulary and grammar but also about understanding and appreciating diverse cultural contexts, which is often difficult to realize on Japanese campuses.

While further longitudinal research is needed to determine the impact of VE and COIL on intent to study abroad, participants in this study did reach consensus that VE serves as an exceptional preparatory tool for international experiences. Kenta's assertion that VE is "excellent preparation for studying abroad" is consistent with Hina's view that while VE is beneficial, it cannot replace the immersive experience of studying overseas.

Conclusion

Findings from this pilot study reveal that university students in Japan experience increased motivation to engage in ELF intercultural encounters as they become more comfortable with the prospect of communicating with others. These outcomes are manifested through the operationalization and development of pre-existing and learned intercultural competences that are difficult to realize in a typical classroom environment in Japan. The outcomes of this study provide a basis for exploring the experiences that Japanese university students have with students in other countries of Southeast Asia, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Upon completion of this full-scale study, educators and administrators in Japan may gain more insight into the potential of VE and COIL, not only as an internationalization-at-home endeavor, but as an impetus to increased study abroad participation, thus satisfying the broader internationalization objectives of institutional and governmental stakeholders.

Use of generative AI

This manuscript made use of ChatGPT 5 to assist in the gathering of information. Also, Claude Sonnet 4 was used for the analysis of qualitative data, particularly for the extraction of exemplars that corresponded to the clusters of meaning, identified by the researchers. No AI tools were used for the generation of research hypotheses or the writing of conclusions.

References

- Beck, C. (2021). *Introduction to phenomenology*. Sage.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.



JALTCALL

Trends

Vol. 2 No. 1
2025 JALTCALL
Conference Papers
Special Issue

- Chu, C., & Torii, Y. (2021). Communicating across cultures online: Introducing and comparing the implementation of three virtual study abroad programs. The JACET International Convention Proceedings: The JACET 60th Commemorative International Convention, 57–58.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Francisco, A. B. (2022, January). Virtual mobility: The lived experience of exchange students in a Higher Education Institution in Asia. In *2nd International Conference on Education and Technology (ICETECH 2021)* (pp. 221–226). Atlantis Press. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220103.032>.
- Huang, H., & Kurata, N. (2024). Learning from the pandemic and looking into the future – the challenges and possibilities for language learning. *The Language Learning Journal*, 52(5), 481–486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2024.2370600>
- Kachru, B. B. (1992). *The other tongue: English across cultures*. University of Illinois Press.
- Kobayashi, Y. (2018). *The evolution of English language learners in Japan: Crossing Japan, the West, and South East Asia*. Routledge.
- MEXT. (2024). Support Project for Creating Social Impact through the Internationalization of Universities. MEXT. https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/kaikaku/sekaitenkai/index_00004.htm
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
- Msekelwa, P. Z. (2023). Beyond the Borders: global collaboration in open distance education through virtual exchanges. *Journal of Knowledge Learning and Science Technology ISSN: 2959–6386 (online)*, 2(2), 1–13.
- Nowlan, A., & Fritz, R. (2022). Experiencing diversity and English as a lingua franca: Japanese university students in Bangkok. *TESOL Communications*, 2(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.58304/tc.20230101>
- Nowlan, A. (2020). Japanese university student experiences with internships in Southeast Asia. *The Journal of Worldwide Education*, 13(2), 4–19.
- Nowlan, A. (2024). Exploring COIL experiences and shifting attitudes toward study abroad in Japan. *Kobe JALT Journal*, 5(1), 16–33.
- Prime Minister's Office of Japan. (2023, March 17). *Council for the Creation of Future Education*. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/actions/202303/_00024.html
- Radjai, L. & Hammond, C. (2024). Internationalizing the curricula through COIL in Japanese higher education: Towards inclusive, accessible, and pluralistic internationalization. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 7(1), 84–106. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.7.41033>
- Sierra, J., Yassim, M., & Suárez-Collado, Á. (2022). Together we can: enhancing key 21st-century skills with international virtual exchange. *Education + Training*, 64(6), 826–843. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-05-2021-0171>
- Smith, M. D. (2021). CALL in a social context: reflecting on digital equity, identity, and interaction in the post-COVID age. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 29(4), 537–549.
- SUNY COIL Center. (2020). What is COIL? Retrieved October 10th, 2025SUNY, from <https://online.suny.edu/introtocoil/suny-coil-what-is/>

Yüksel, P., & Yıldırım, S. (2015). Theoretical frameworks, methods, and procedures for conducting phenomenological studies in educational settings. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(1), 1–20.
<https://doi.org/10.17569/tojqi.59813>

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Kakenhi) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, project 24K16145. The authors are grateful for this funding and to the 12 students who provided data for the study.

Author biodata

Andrew G. P. Nowlan, EdD, is an associate professor of language and culture at Kwansei Gakuin University. His research interests include collaborative online international learning (COIL), study abroad, internationalization, and intercultural competence development.

Michael Wilkins, M.S.Ed., is an assistant professor of language education at Kwansei Gakuin University. His research interests include speaking fluency, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and multilingualism.