

Language-Exchange Meetings: The Second Year of developing ICU Language Tables

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Abstract

This report is about the second year of the ongoing voluntary project on language exchange meetings, ICU Language Tables. It was established in autumn 2016, and from autumn 2017 to spring 2018, volunteer student coordinators, the author of this report as an instructor of English for Liberal Arts (ELA), administrators, professors, and instructors collaborated on this endeavor. Based on the author's reflection and students' responses, this report will first present an overview of the second year, extra-curricular speaking programs in universities in Japan, and language-exchange meetings. Then, five issues from the author's perspective and five themes from participants' perspectives revealed in surveys and interviews will be discussed. Though the project addressed issues raised in the preliminary study, to further create a desirable environment, dealing with ongoing and new issues, attention to participants' needs, and support for diverse students are crucial.

Background

Overview of the Second Year

This report presents the second year of an endeavor to design ICU Language Tables. Since its initiation, committed student staff and the author have continued to develop the project. During the second year, thanks to a tremendous effort by student coordinators, administrators, instructors, and professors, the activity gained broader recognition in the ICU community and was gradually expanded. Professors and instructors joined as team members when we applied for a grant in autumn 2017. They also encouraged students to attend Language Tables (LTs). Instructors also began to join as participants. The fund we received in January 2018 helped us to offer honorariums to English and Japanese language hosts. Finding more hosts enabled us to consistently provide E/J tables and more opportunities for learners to practice speaking target languages.

Student coordinators and a volunteer coordinator (the author) were able to organize the structure more efficiently than in previous years. Suggested themes were prepared for each table meeting (Table 1). They were publicized via weekly portal announcements. They prepared example questions for English and Japanese tables and sent them to participants in the mailing list every week (Table 2).

Table 1

Schedule in spring 2018

Week	Japanese Tables	English Tables
1	Snack party, Self-introduction, What you want to do at ICU	Snack party, What you want to do for the future
2	Movies	Language learning tools
5	Social media	Smartphones
7	Travel experiences	Environment
8	Family ties	Presentation on Israel
9	Untranslatable words	Test-taking tips

Concerning students' involvement, participation was completely voluntary. Volunteer hosts were recruited among students and instructors who were proficient in the target languages. They included both native and non-native speakers.

Outside-of-Class Speaking Opportunities in Universities in Japan

Various efforts to provide outside of class speaking opportunities have been made in universities in Japan, and the number has increased over the past 20 years. The author looked for similar activities through an internet search, conferences, and visitations, and found there seemed to be three different ways to offer these programs. First, English-speaking students help English learners. For example, English Community Zone at Toyo University, which was opened in 2013, takes this approach ("English Community Zone"). Another way is that English-speaking instructors help students, such as Cotopatio at Tokyo Keizai University, which was opened in 2015 ("Global lounge"). Finally, language schools offer courses on the campus. Examples are Campus English at Nihon University, which started about 20 years ago, ("Nihon daigaku") and Special English Lesson at Tokyo University, which was established in 2005, ("RareJob"; "Special English"). Some universities make a contract with schools that offer online language courses ("Daigaku").

Table 2

Example questions for Japanese and English tables on April 23rd, 2018

にほんごテーブル nihongo teburu

1. じこしょうかいしましょう。 jikoshokai shimasho

たとえば tatoeba

- 1) しゅうまつはなにをしましたか。 syumatsu wa nani o shimashitaka.
- 2) にほんにいつきましたか。 nihon ni itsu kimashitaka.
- 3) しゅみはなんですか。 syumi wa nandesuka.

2. きょうのトピック kyo no topikku

えいが eiga

例えば tatoeba

- 1) いちばんすきな えいがは なんですか。 ichiban sukina eiga wa nandesuka.
- 2) どんな えいがが すきですか。 こめでいですか。 ほら一ですか。 donna eiga ga suki desuka. komedi desuka. hora desuka.
- 3) えいがは いえで みますか。 それとも えいがかんで みますか。 eigawa iede mimasuka. soreto eigan de mimasuka.
- 4) えいがを みるときに たべる すなつくは なにか いいですか。 eiga o miru toki ni taberu sunakku wa naniga iidesuka.
- 5) すきな はいゆう や じょゆう は だれですか。 sukina haiyu ya joyu wa daredesuka.

English Tables

1. Introduce to each other.

Examples:

- 1) How do you come to ICU?
- 2) What classes are you taking this trimester?
- 3) What makes you smile?

2. Today's topic:

Language Learning Tools

Examples:

- 1) Do you use movies for language learning? Do you like foreign films that are dubbed in your native tongue or do you like watching the film with subtitles?
 - 2) Do you use free language-learning exercises on the Internet?
 - 3) What apps do you use to learn different languages?
 - 4) How do you use your smartphone or other devices to learn different languages?
 - 5) What tools will be useful in the future for learning different languages?
- (Adapted from "Conversation Questions: Learning a Foreign Language")

Language Exchange Meetings

ICU Language Tables are language-exchange meetings, which are similar to tandem-learning (Ueno, 2017); however, one difference is that they meet in a group. It can be defined as face-to-face meetings where a proficient speaker helps language learners in a group (Kitamura & Nishikawa, 2017). These meetings are likely to be held in two ways. First, native-speaking students help other students. Language Exchange at Sophia University offers Japanese, English, and other languages in this way (Kitamura & Nishikawa, 2017). The other case is that native-speaking students and instructors help other students as in MPPEC at Meikai University. They offer Japanese, English, and Chinese languages ("P&P").

Student participation is counted differently. It is entirely voluntary at Sophia University (Kitamura & Nishikawa, 2017). In another case, participation is included in their grades in the program, for example, Middlebury College (M. Takahashi, Personal Communication, Dec. 29, 2016) and Soka Women's College (Chan, 2016). In the third case, instructors assign students to participate in the program and count it in the grades of a course, for example, at Tokyo Keizai University (Kiyota, 2018). At Kansai University of International Studies, participation is included in the course grade depending on the programs: participation in presentations given by learners is counted while attending free discussions is not (Sasaki, 2009).

Research Questions

The research questions are 1. What are effective ways to revise and sustain language-exchange meetings? 2. What are the participants' needs? 3. How can coordinators meet the expectations of participants from different backgrounds?

Data Collection

One of the voluntary coordinators, who is the author and an ELA instructor at the university, recorded the issues and questions in her reflective journal. She also took notes on comments in the meetings with LT student coordinators and language hosts. Coordinators conducted surveys by sending two questionnaires. One was sent in March 2018 to fifty-five students who participated in LT in winter 2017, and six responses were received. The other was distributed in June 2018 to 110 students who participated in LTs in spring 2018, and 12 responses were received. The data was collected anonymously; therefore, it is possible for the same respondents to respond to the two surveys. Interviews were conducted with those who volunteered among questionnaire participants: five students in March 2018 and one student in June 2018. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Comments or responses in Japanese were translated by the author.

Discussion

First, five issues that continued to emerge from journals and notes are presented, and then five themes in students' responses in questionnaires and journals are discussed.

1. Location. As the number of participants increased, a larger room was necessary. Since announcements through the ICU portal began, the number of participants increased. The largest number of participants was 37 at one table session, and they occupied almost all the chairs in a small classroom.

Thanks to Dr. Onishi and Dr. Maher, a new space was opened in the Dialogue House, and LTs received first priority to use it when tables would be held from autumn 2018. This space has more sunlight and close to the cafeteria. Students can bring in food and have easier access to foods and drinks. The only problem will be access to this space. The stairs are the only way to come to this place and it is not easy to find them; coordinators will need some preparation for special needs students.

2. Structure. Participants expressed the sessions needed to be longer. Having only 20 minutes for each session was too short. Therefore, 5 minutes were added to each: Japanese tables (12:50-13:15) and English tables (13:15-13:40); however, it may be still short for participants to get to know each other and discuss their ideas thoroughly.

3. Staffing volunteers. Having three to five student coordinators, offering honorariums to hosts, and publicizing activities through ICU portal strengthened the organization of LT and stabilized its operation.

Student coordinators originally came from ICU hub, a club activity; however, participants of LT began to be involved. They have at least two meetings, one before and one after a term. They oversee publicity, including Facebook, a mailing list for participants, Instagram, Website, and signs in and around the classroom, the flow of every language-table meeting, preparation of foods and drinks, and recruitment of and service as language hosts. The volunteer instructor prepared suggested topics and questions and was responsible for accounting; however, student coordinators began to choose topics gradually. In spring 2018, three student coordinators were April students and one was a September student. They were all Juniors. It will be necessary to keep looking for the next coordinators who are from different backgrounds and younger.

The funding we received from JICUF was vital to find hosts, who could serve regularly and responsibly. Although the amount was less than what we originally planned, we were able to offer honorariums to hosts. The search was announced through the ICU portal, which contributed to the recognition of our activity and our needs. The number of English hosts increased (Figure 1). At the same time, the volunteer instructor began to hold a meeting for hosts or meet them in person before they served as hosts to give necessary information about LT and tips to become a successful host.

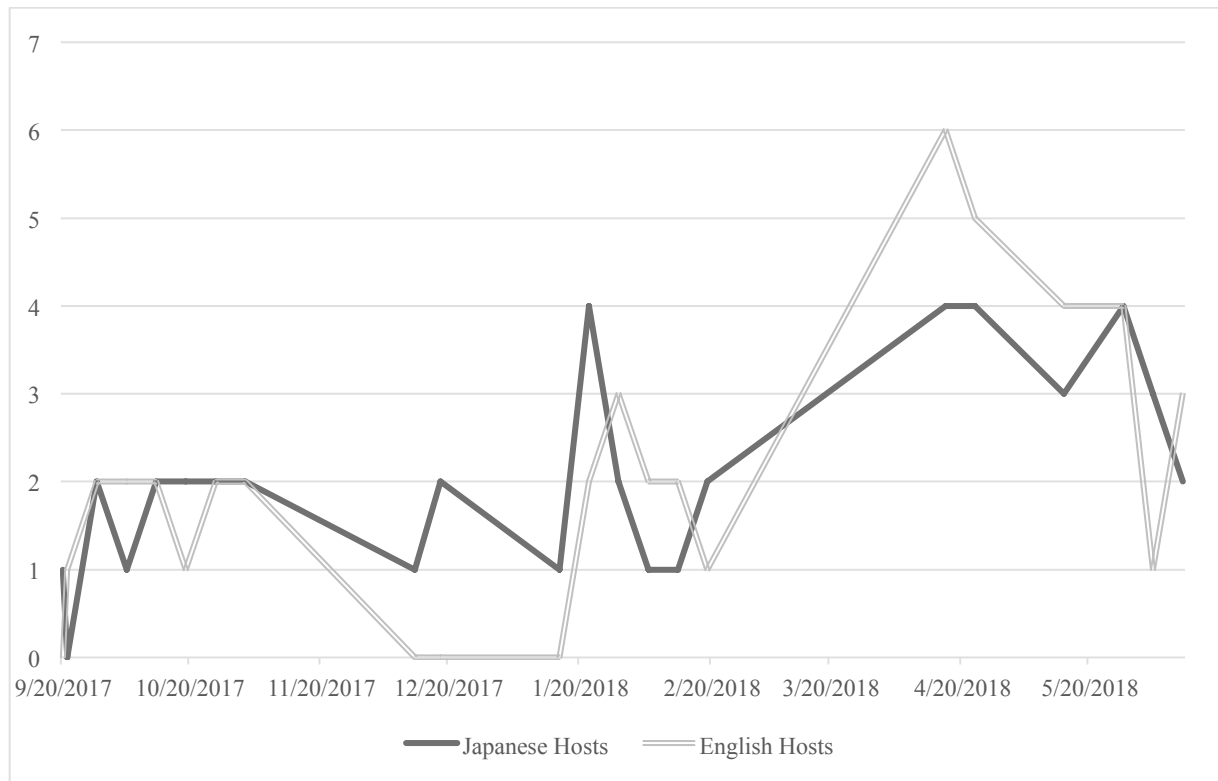


Figure 1. The number of language hosts at Japanese and English tables from 2017 autumn to 2018 spring.

4. Advertising. Announcements made through the ICU portal made our messages noticed by students more efficiently. Support from different offices and departments continued to contribute to raising awareness about LTs among students. Thanks to Dr. Matsuda and Dr. Ozawa, cooperation from JLP started, which accelerated publicizing our activity.

5. Attendance. The number of participants increased notably after the portal announcement started in January 2018 (Figure 2). Not only students but also instructors began to join.

Concurrently, tables for languages other than Japanese and English have undergone several changes. Up until autumn 2017, coordinators tried to hold tables for languages other than Japanese and English in the same classroom next to weekly Japanese and English tables. Thanks to Dr. Matsuda's cooperation, we were able to find Chinese and Korean hosts. Chinese tables were held twice in 2017 autumn, where a few participants joined; however, no participant appeared for a Korean table. This situation was mainly because of the lack of publicity at that time. Eventually, the Korean host stopped coming. In 2017 winter, we received a recommendation from the funding organization to use the grant specifically for English and Japanese tables; therefore, no tables except for Japanese and English tables were held. In the meantime, we received several requests from students for tables for other languages. In 2018 spring, coordinators decided to hold tables for other languages only once in a term for each language. This experiment was made possible by dedicated international students. 22 participants attended Spanish tables, seven participants Russian tables, and eight participants French tables (Figure 3).

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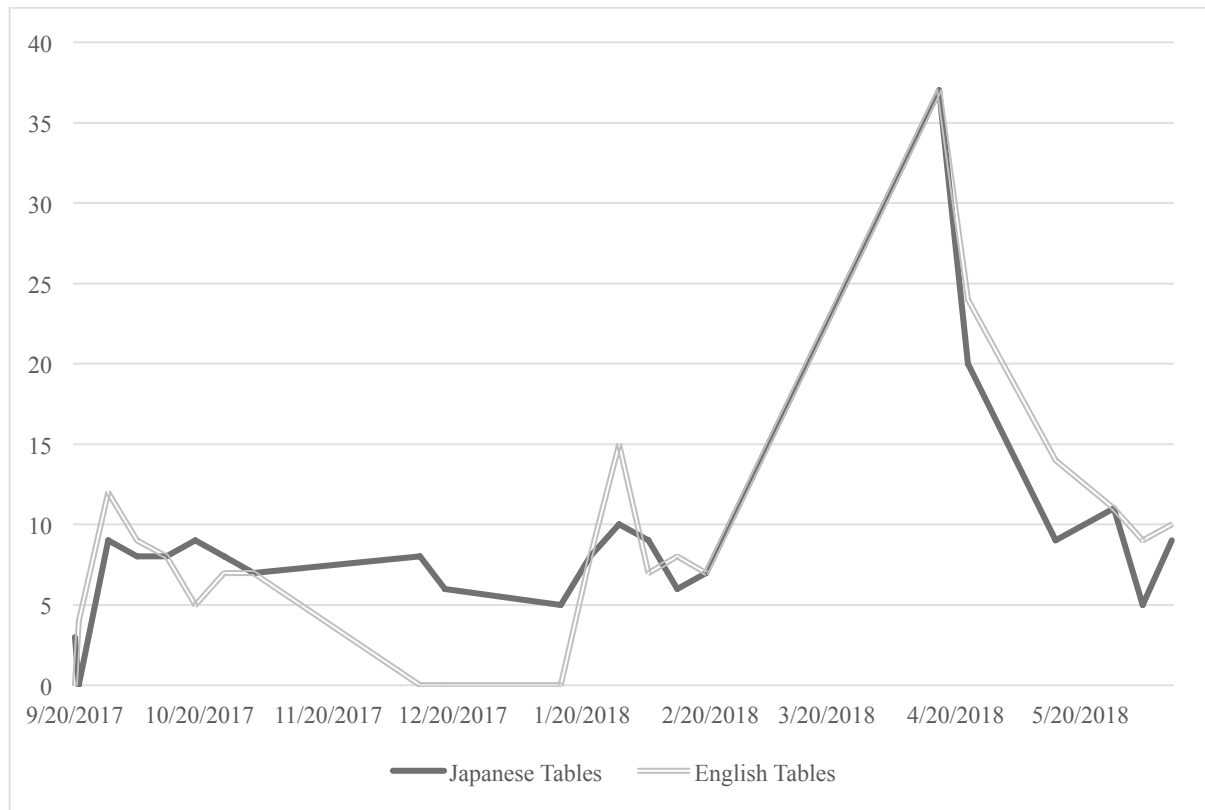


Figure 2. The Number of participants at Japanese and English tables from 2017 autumn to 2018 spring.

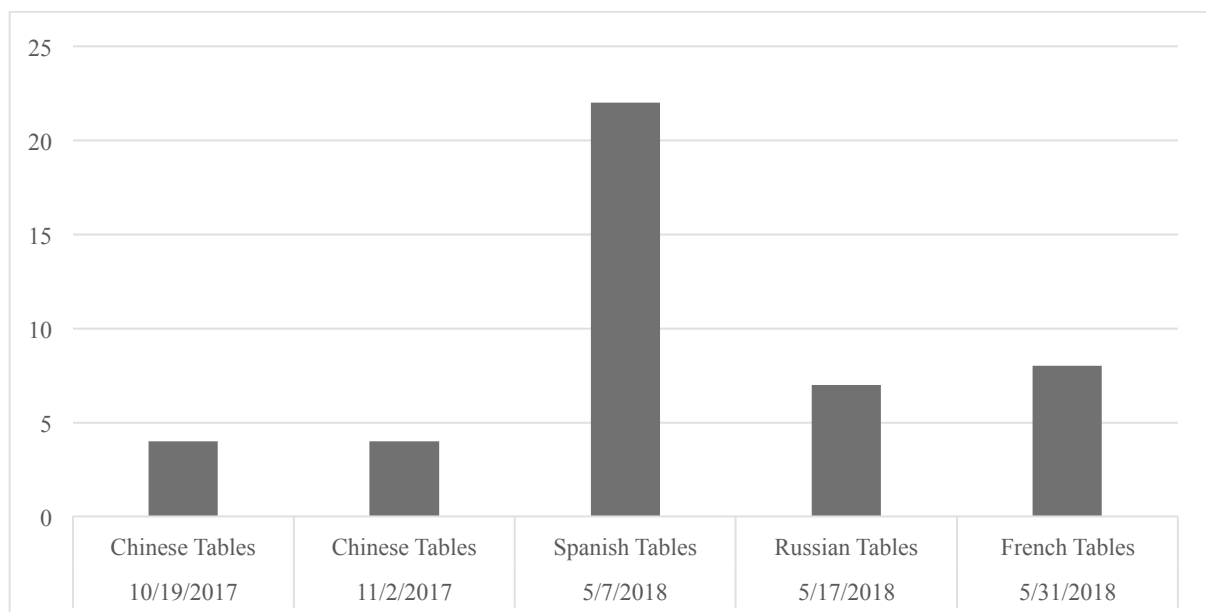


Figure 3. The number of participants at tables for languages other than English and Japanese from 2017 autumn to 2018 spring.

Participant Responses

To further investigate the perception of participants, responses were collected: they are mostly participants who attended LT repeatedly (83% in March and 67% in June). They were from various backgrounds, all years of undergraduate school, graduate students, and other members of the ICU community. The interviewees' basic data are described in Table 3.

Table 3
Interviewees' basic data

Interviewee (Pseudonym)	Role at LT	Undergraduate or graduate	Target languages	Data collection
Kumi	Student coordinator	Undergraduate	English	March, 2018
Ema	Student coordinator	Undergraduate	English, Spanish	March, 2018
Sumi	Student coordinator	Undergraduate	English, German	March, 2018
Risa	Student coordinator	Undergraduate	English, French, Russian	March, 2018
Meg	Student coordinator	Undergraduate	Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish	March, 2018
Amy	Participant	Undergraduate	Japanese	June, 2018

Compared with the results of the students' responses in June 2017 (Ueno, 2017), three out of five themes showed few changes in the two questionnaires conducted in March and June in 2018 (See Table 4). The primary reason for participating in LTs was practicing speaking skills. The place to practice speaking target languages were mostly in language classes at the university, followed by other classes on campus. Concerning language preferences at LTs, the top need was English, and Japanese was ranked second. It is interesting to note that they requested some languages for which official courses were not offered at the university.

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Table 4

Themes that Showed Similar Results

	June 2017	March 2018	June 2018
Q: What brought you to the Language Tables? (Multiple answers possible)			
To practice speaking a different language	86.0%	100.0%	84.0%
To make new friends	37.5%	33.0%	25.0%
Q: Where else do you have the opportunity to practice speaking your target language? (Multiple answers possible)			
At home	29.0%	0.0%	16.7%
In language classes such as ELA, JLP, and WL	100.0%	50.0%	41.7%
In classes on campus (not including language classes)	43.0%	50.0%	25.0%
At circles or club activities	57.0%	50.0%	16.7%
In the dormitory	29.0%	0.0%	8.3%
Other:			
Outside campus (incl. work, language school)	29.0%	33.0%	25.0%
With friends			8.3%
Not much			8.3%
Q: What languages would you like to practice speaking at Language Tables in the future? (Multiple answers possible)			
English	86.0%	67.0%	55.0%
Korean	29.0%	0.0%	9.0%
Spanish	14.0%	33.0%	0.0%
Chinese	29.0%	0.0%	27.0%
Japanese	43.0%	33.0%	27.0%
Russian	0.0%	17.0%	0.0%
French	43.0%	17.0%	46.0%
Other:			
German		17.0%	
Portugese		17.0%	
Vietnamese			9.0%

On the other hand, two themes, satisfaction and topics, revealed further issues, and three new themes, meeting styles, tables for languages other than English or Japanese, and difficulty in holding enjoyable discussions, emerged.

1. Satisfaction. First, satisfaction with practicing their target language has been decreasing though students gave much positive feedback on our activity (Table 5). This result might be due to the increase in participants and the less amount of time to talk in each group. We received positive comments on the question in the surveys, "What did you enjoy about LT? What did you gain?" The following are some examples of comments:

Table 5
A Theme that Showed Major Changes

	June 2017	March 2018	June 2018
Were you able to practice speaking your target language enough?			
5 Yes, very much.	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%
4	50.0%	100.0%	33.3%
3	0.0%	0.0%	58.3%
2	0.0%	0.0%	8.3%
1 Not at all.	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

"By talking with international students, I was able to know their home countries directly."

"I was able to make friends with more people. It was interesting to talk with people from various backgrounds."

"Meeting students, especially the international students as I never meet them."

"I got to know things I did not know before, such as calligraphy or Vietnam."

"Workshops on Japanese culture, Presentations given by various guests."

"Meeting new people."

"I enjoyed sharing my culture with other individuals as well as hearing their perspectives on my culture or traits that my culture and their culture shared."

"I was able to communicate with people who had various ideas."

Furthermore, interviewees explained what they gained through LT in more detail. One participant found it interesting to learn about different cultures.

I was able to learn about Israel or those things that I was not familiar with. Also, it was interesting to hear someone explain the cultures of countries, such as Ireland or Scotland, which I do not have a chance to listen to... (Kumi, March 2, 2018)

Another participant realized good aspects of their own culture.

I was so happy that those international students chose Japan to come and study. . . . I am so amazed. . . . Then, I asked, "Why did you choose Japan?" and I realized good aspects of Japan and realizing this was so much fun. (Ema, March 2, 2018)

This student became increasingly aware of how to use the target language more sensitively.

When I got to know them more closely, my desire to express subtle nuances sensitively grew more. I know I can practice speaking English with Japanese students, . . . but when I talk with international students, a common language is English, and, in that case, I want to express my sensitive feelings. . . . I didn't have this idea when I was in ELA. . . . When international students talked with me in Japanese, I felt their thoughtfulness. When they chose words, they were choosing words deliberately, which, to me, sounded polite or humble. (Ema, March 2, 2018)

Another student became aware of the way to use their native language.

To me, it was a good practice to speak Japanese or English so that international students could understand. . . . I realized speaking Japanese so that international students could understand was quite tricky. Because my native language is Japanese . . . I didn't know what was difficult for international students. . . . When I talked with them, it was good practice for me. (Sumi, March 2, 2018)

Meanwhile, negative aspects were pointed out in the comments for the question in surveys, "What was disappointing or different from what you expected?" The following are examples:

"Fluent participants continued to talk, and it was hard to catch up with the discussion."

"I wanted to practice speaking German, but I did not have a chance."

"When one host had four to five students in a group, there was not enough time for each participant to speak."

"Sometimes the conversation wasn't lively. It is difficult for a host to energize a discussion."

"Since the time is short, the time to speak the language is limited."

2. Topics. As for topics, students pointed out preferred topics and less preferred ones. According to the interview data, preferred topics are ones that are interesting to everyone, for example, their lifestyles or customs, topics related to different cultures and customs, topics that encourage participants to imagine situations that are different from the reality or about the future, and topics related to language learning. On the other hand, less preferred topics are ones that only a few people are familiar with, such as a martial art like Aikido, research topics of students majoring in science, or introducing a city or town.

3. Meeting styles. One of the three new themes was about meeting styles. LT began to have different styles, such as presentations and workshops where other club members on campus introduce their activity or help participants experience the skills (Table 6). It was an opportunity for students to learn about different activities or skills; however, some expressed that they came to speak target languages and needed more time for speaking practice and discussions (Table 7).

Table 6

Number of Discussions, Workshops, and Presentations

	Discussion	Workshop	Presentation
2018 winter Japanese Tables	3	3	2
2018 winter English Tables	4	1	0
2018 spring Japanese Tables	6	0	0
2018 spring English Tables	5	0	1

Table 7

Participants' Responses about the Frequency of Different Styles of Meetings

	March 2018	June 2018
Q: What did you think about the frequency of discussions, presentations, and workshops?		
Fine	86.0%	50.0%
We need more discussions.	29.0%	25.0%
We need more presentations.	0.0%	0.0%
We need more workshops.	0.0%	8.3%
Other:	0.0%	
I'd like you to plan that 90% of the activity is for speaking.		8.3%
No comment		8.3%

4. Tables for languages other than English or Japanese. The second new theme was related to tables for languages other than English or Japanese. In the interview, requests and reasons for holding language tables other than E/J tables were expressed. These will be opportunities for students majoring in natural science because they cannot take language classes other than English due to their schedule. Also, they can be chances to learn languages that are not offered as official language courses at the university.

5. Difficulty in holding enjoyable discussions. In the interview, participants expressed challenges or issues when they tried to hold enjoyable discussions. Their comments can be divided into three categories: discussion participants, discussion hosts, and meeting the level of participants.

First, as participants, they experienced difficulties in turn-taking, feeling relaxed, and understanding the challenges non-native speakers have in speaking their target languages. Some participants expressed difficulty in turn-taking when they joined English tables.

Sometimes I felt left out when other participants were discussing a topic... When there was only one international student and others were Japanese, the [international] student seemed to be careful so that everyone could speak up. However, if there were more international students, I felt rather difficult to join. I am usually a person who

tends to listen to others and not to say my opinions when people are discussing (Risa, March 2, 2018).

When there were native speakers or fluent people in a group, it was difficult to join the discussion. . . . Especially when the topic did not make for lively discussion, it was quite hard. . . . For example, music. Many other group members lived in other countries or the U.S.A. . . . I only knew music in Japan, so I couldn't follow their discussion. . . . They were so enthusiastic about the music they know, and I could not find the right time to join their talk (Sumi, March 2, 2018).

They also felt tense when practicing their target languages. One student expressed the fear of making mistakes.

The biggest fear I have is I might be criticized when I make a mistake. . . . But at ICU Language Tables, there is no atmosphere like that. I felt everybody was trying to help (Amy, June 25, 2018).

Therefore, talking about familiar topics decreased their stress in speaking target languages.

When I introduced myself first in English, it took away my stressed feelings. . . . Now when I looked back, self-introduction might have been the most exciting part. . . . If we do not know each other, we tend to talk about superficial things, but if we know them a little, we can talk about something they feel connected to (Ema, March 2, 2018).

It depends on the host, but they tend to skip self-introduction. . . . I feel it might be easier for me to start talking when they start with self-introduction (Sumi, March 2, 2018).

When I talked about American culture, I felt less anxious (Amy, June 25, 2018).

Furthermore, participants felt it difficult to understand what was challenging for non-native speakers when they tried to speak their target languages.

A participant sitting next to me seemed to fail to understand what was said [by a Japanese participant]. . . . It seems he did not understand quite basic words, so I was concerned. . . . In that case, it would be better [for the Japanese speaker] to change the words or explain the words in English (Meg, March 5, 2018).

From the perspective of discussion hosts, they pointed out difficulties in playing the role of a discussion leader. First, it was difficult to ask everyone to speak up. Second, they had a hard time controlling a discussion when one participant spoke most of the time and others listened. They felt the need to acquire more skills. Next, another difficulty was sustaining a discussion when the topic did not lend itself to much discussion. Finally, they found dealing with silence difficult.

In terms of the linguistic level of participants, coordinators found it necessary to focus on novice and intermediate learners. First, beginning with self-introduction was effective since novice learners felt more comfortable to talk about themselves than topics that were less familiar to them. Second, it turned out that novice and intermediate learners seemed to not be able to ask, "What is that?" when they could not catch some parts in discussions. Finally, matching the needs of most international students was necessary. A discussion will be stimulating to advanced learners; however, many learners of Japanese at the university tend to be novice and intermediate learners and discussion seemed to be challenging to them.

Regarding research question 1, effective ways to revise and sustain language-exchange meetings, all five suggestions made in the preliminary study, which were increased recognition among faculty, their encouragement to participate in LT, creating a recruiting system of coordinators and language hosts, modification of the LT structure, and a desirable location (Ueno, 2017), were implemented with the help of various members of ICU community. In order to further improve the activity, dealing with continuing issues of satisfaction and topics and new issues of meeting styles, tables for languages other than English and Japanese, and difficulty in holding enjoyable discussions is critical.

Concerning research question 2, participants' needs, they have strong needs to practice speaking skills of target languages outside of class. Their desire for a longer time of practice may mean consideration of an expansion of LT and possibly more different channels to help support their speaking skills.

Regarding research question 3, how to meet the expectations of participants from different backgrounds, providing more support to decrease fear of speaking target languages, adjusting to different linguistic levels of participants, and guiding language hosts to lead discussions effectively are indispensable.

Conclusion

This paper has reported the second year challenges and achievements of a language-exchange program at a university. Coordinators and team members were able to address issues raised in the preliminary project and produced considerable improvements in location, structure, staffing volunteers, attendance, and advertising. However, two ongoing themes remain, satisfaction and topics, and three new themes emerged, meeting styles, tables for languages other than English and Japanese, and difficulty in holding enjoyable discussions. To further improve the LT activity, dealing with these issues is critical. Meanwhile, it is desirable to conduct further analysis of students' needs for their speaking skills. It will also be beneficial to provide more sensitive and practical support for diverse participants to overcome emotional barriers and for language hosts to serve as effective discussion leaders. Holding language-exchange meetings is challenging; however, this is a valuable opportunity for members of the community in the university to practice speaking target languages in an authentic learning environment. Continuous efforts will create an enhanced environment where various members of the university community can fulfill their linguistic potential while forming relational bonds with each other.

Acknowledgments

My sincere appreciation and thanks to all those who supported me in continuing the development of this project: Dr. Onishi, Dr. Maher, ELA Director Dr. Iwata, ELA Director G. O'Connell, WL Director Dr. Quintero, Dr. Matsuda, JLP Director Dr. Ozawa, ICU Hub, and other faculty, administrative staff, and students. I would like to thank the Japan ICU Foundation for funding.

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