



EFL in the I-City and li-Learning Community Lab: a Class in a Cyber-Metropolitan City to Address Education Inequality Stemming from Economy and Geography

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to present an idea to address education inequality stemming from economy and geography, especially in English education. Schools on small islands in Japan serve very small numbers of students. While they have advantages in English education because of the small teacher-to-student ratio, they have disadvantages given the limited interaction they have with people of various cultures and with various Englishes to improve academic skills in English and to cultivate the ability to understand and respect others. This is true of other countries as well. Numerous people in large cities come from rural areas. Therefore, a joint class in a cyber-metropolitan city (i-City) created by connecting schools on small islands in several countries could be beneficial, especially by utilizing Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Such a class could help address the problem of educational inequality. We set up an English class as a project with the use of Zoom and large screen displays. Analysis of the answers in the questionnaire conducted after classes showed that students felt stimulated and empowered by each other which led to an increase in their levels of motivation to learn more English and also to learn more about each other's culture and the people themselves. For the sustainability of the English class, we set up the online portal community for teacher's collaboration between islands and islands where teachers in the world can call for a partner of English class. This community fulfills the i-City project that addresses inequality in EFL stemming from economy and geography.

Keywords: *Inequality of Education, Compulsory Education, Islands, Secluded Areas, ICT.*

1. The issues and a potential solution

There are many schools delivering compulsory education systems on islands and in remote areas of the world. Some regions themselves comprise many large and small islands, which is true of Japan as well. Characteristically, the number of students in elementary and junior high schools on the islands in Japan has always been small. In recent years, this number has been decreasing rapidly due to the declining birthrate across the nation. As a result, many schools have been closed or merged, or often, students are educated in combined classes. This will also happen in other regions with a low birthrate in the future.

Such an educational environment is advantageous in some respects and disadvantageous in others for students in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) education [1]. Teachers can provide individual attention to students because of the low teacher-student ratio. Besides, as Matsumoto et al. found, a combined class, which consists of students of different ages, fosters effective development of students' academic abilities, as well as their social/emotional development, given the opportunities for collaborative learning [2]. However, students in such schools are disadvantaged, unlike their counterparts in a large city, because their geographical location limits their opportunities to exchange opinions, to practice listening to various English pronunciations and expressions, to learn about multicultural phenomena, and to meet people from other parts of Japan and from other countries. Nowadays, the English language is increasingly the center of attention because of a global society, hence, some students move to a big city to secure a better EFL education, and of course, relocation costs a lot. In addition, an island or a secluded area suffers from depopulation and economic recession [3]. These advantages and disadvantages are true of schools on small islands and in secluded areas in other countries, wherever students learn English as a foreign language.

Is there a solution to the problems stemming from geographical isolation, so that schools on islands and in isolated areas of the world can provide at least as effective an English education as schools in large cities?

A potential solution is to provide an English class in a cyber-metropolitan city, or i-City, for students on small islands, as well as for students from various ethnic backgrounds in remote areas in other countries, who can connect with each other through Information and Communications Technology



(ICT). People who live in large cities have often come from different rural communities. If students from small islands get together and communicate with each other in a given area, they can learn English in an educational environment similar to that found in large cities.

Such an educational environment can be created by ICT, especially through a telecommunication/teleconference system, such as Zoom, Flickr, VoiceThread, and a virtual learning environment, such as CANVAS. They can create a school in a virtual cyber-metropolitan city, or i-City, where schools connect with each other and their students can experience and learn more about diverse cultures, thoughts, expressions, and different pronunciations of English. They can engage in an exchange of opinions, just like their peers in large cities. The i-City can be a global society as well, when schools on small islands or in secluded areas of the world are connected by ICT.

2. Joint classes in a cyber-metropolitan school

To test the i-City as a concept, we set up an English class as a project; eleven- or twelve-year-old students from two elementary schools on two islands in Japan—in Hokkaido and the Goto Islands in Nagasaki, and Sado Island in Niigata -- in Japan in 2016 and 2017, and on the Goto Islands in Nagasaki and Oahu in Hawaii in 2018, joined the class with the use of Zoom and large-screen displays.

The preparation for all the classes was basically the same. We had discussed the preparation in other papers, and now we review points from the past papers, and add new information about the class between the Goto Islands and Oahu.

In preparation for the class, we discussed the theme, the main task, the activities, the content, the class schedule, and so on, with the classroom teachers of both schools [4]. Generally speaking, an elementary school teacher in Japan has to use textbooks in class, which are approved by the Ministry of Education in Japan. The textbook for English is *Hi, friends!* The teachers chose a lesson from this book, Lesson 7, which was suitable for the joint English class, and its theme was “to express an idea plainly and clearly in English.” Consequently, the activities for the class were as follows: the students of each school split into several groups and one group set a quiz for the students of the other school on their own characteristic, cultural or historical matters or events; the students in one of the groups from the other school answered the quiz; then the students who set the quiz told the other students the correct answers. They then made a short presentation as an introduction to their culture in a way which could be easily understood. The students of both schools did the quiz-answer-presentation activities so that each group of students had a turn. Before the day of the class, the students had prepared for their presentations, choosing topics from the exhaustive list of themes that are used in an English class to promote cross-cultural understanding, and which are in the book *Languages and Children: Making the Match* (1994) by H. Curtain & C. A. Pesola. Also, we suggested that, in the presentation, the students of the two elementary schools should share a socio-cultural and geographic fact, for instance, that they live on small islands surrounded by the sea, because as Zhang points out, it is critical for mutual understanding in a global society that there is recognition of affinity as well as difference [5].

In addition to them, teachers in schools on the Goto Islands and Oahu prepared for the class, taking special care with the following matters: before the class, students practice communication in English slowly, loudly, and clearly; students in Hawaii practice to use comparatively easy words; the themes are limited to food, festivals, geography, and sightseeing so that students can easily ask questions and answer them; and teachers support their students when they cannot catch what students in the other school say and when they do not know how to answer questions. Thanks to these preparations and support, students in both schools can communicate with each other better and more smoothly than expected.

3. Result and discussion

After the classes, we gave out a questionnaire using free-answer questions about the class to all the students and the teachers of the schools who had taken part. We compiled a corpus of their answers and focused on significant words and phrases. The results of the analysis (the total number of students in six schools is 87) are as follows: “fun” (83)/“I want to join this class again” (75); “I want to study English hard/how to make a presentation” (69); “I discover what self-worth I could build in being part of humanity and in my academic ability in English by making myself understood in English and developing a mutual understanding” (68); “I was excited to talk with students of different cultural backgrounds for the first time in my life” (68); and so on. In the Goto-Oahu class, almost 70% of the Oahu students wrote that they should study how to make an effective presentation after admiring



presentations by the students in Goto. It means that this kind of class is significant not just in English teaching but in the interactive stimulation of academic ability.

It should also be noted that, as a consequence of the project, the English class in the i-City had a big impact on the teachers as well. All of them wrote in the questionnaire that the English teaching of the teachers in the other schools was very informative and helpful for their own teaching. In this sense, the teachers, who always work with the same teachers on their island, were also stimulated and empowered by each other. Thus, it can be concluded that the outcomes of the project show the true potential that the English class in the i-City embodies.

4. Learning community lab for sustainability of i-City

To build the sustainable i-City, we must consider several things, such as differences of time zone, gap in academic ability of English, a suitable class period, and a platform on the Web for schools to freely and autonomously carry out their class. If the academic abilities in English of students all over the world were similar, they could communicate freely and empower each other in the cyberspace class among several classes, but it is not realistic, especially for the elementary or junior high school student. Presentations in English and quiz-and-answer sessions are down-to-earth ways to deliver educational outcomes. It is not feasible, however, to connect many schools, just two schools, because of the time-limitation of the class. Also, teachers have to look for a partner school.

As a solution to these issues, we set up the online portal community for teacher collaboration between islands (ii-Learning Community Lab), with the use of an application on the web such as CANVAS. CANVAS presents a community where teachers all over the world can search for a partner school, according to time-zone difference, the students' academic ability in English, and other criteria. Teachers can access the community lab and can connect with each other anytime, design lesson plans, identify useful tools for the class. This community fulfills the i-City project that addresses education inequality stemming from economy and geography, especially in EFL education.

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References

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