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## Преодоление изоляции в условиях пандемии и постпандемии: на примере России и Японии в сфере высшего образования

Л.В. Жилина

**Аннотация.** Вспышка пандемии COVID-19 с начала 2020 г. резко повлияла на развитие высшего образования в различных аспектах, включая переход от очного к онлайн-обучению, отмену различных мероприятий и активностей и формирование «новой нормальности» в высшем образовании [Tesar 2020]. В то же время пандемия повысила виртуальную мобильность и совместное онлайн-обучение, создав альтернативу физической мобильности студентов. Для развития продвижения межкультурного диалога посредством онлайн-общения, основанного на изучении иностранных языков, и для мотивации студентов, преподаватели из Университета Кансай (Япония, Осака) и Омского государственного университета им. Ф.М. Достоевского (Россия, Омск) начали использовать платформу *Flipgrid* для межкультурного онлайн-обмена между студентами вышеуказанных вузов.

В настоящем исследовании в контексте вышеизложенного анализируются результаты онлайн-опроса, проведённого среди студентов этих двух вузов. Цель опроса – понять, что именно мотивировало студентов на участие в нём и как они оценивают это участие. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют, что участники положительно отзывались как об актуальности модели эффективной языковой практики, так и о значении международного общения для лучшего понимания культуры и людей страны – ближайшего соседа по АТР. Таким образом, изучение культурных особенностей других представляет собой первый шаг в приобретении межкультурных компетенций для студентов обоих университетов и для начала межкультурного диалога между ними.

**Ключевые слова:** Япония, межкультурное общение, японские студенты, международный онлайн-проект, взаимодействие студентов.

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## **Defeating isolation in the pandemic and post pandemic new dispensation: The case study of Russia and Japan in higher education**

**L.V. Zhilina**

**Abstract.** The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 has dramatically impacted higher education development in various aspects, including the shift of face-to-face teaching to online teaching and learning, the cancellation of physical events and activities, and the formation of a “new normality” in higher education [Tesar, 2020]. At the same time, COVID-19 has increased virtual mobility and collaborative online learning as alternatives to physical student mobility.

For developing promotion of intercultural dialogue through the online communication based on learning foreign languages and motivating students, faculty members from Kansai University (Japan, Osaka) and F.M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University (Russia, Omsk) started to use the platform *Flipgrid* for intercultural online exchange between the students of the above-mentioned universities.

Based on an online survey of students’ participation in the exchange project, this research examines how the Russo-Japanese intercultural online project affected students’ motivation and ultimately their participation in the project, as well as their evaluation of the achieved results. The feedback from this project has been positive – participants commented favorably on both the relevance of the model of effective language practice and the significance of international communication for better cultural understanding and furthering human relationships with Japan, a close neighbor of Russia in the Asia-Pacific region. It may be surmised that an appreciation for cultural diversity and other cultures provides the first step in developing the competences necessary for operating in multicultural environments. Therefore, this was, for the students of both universities, the start of intercultural dialogue between them.

**Keywords:** Japan, intercultural communication, Japanese students, international online project, student collaboration.

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## Preface

At present, participants of international cooperation, which, at the initial stage, were mainly the governments of interested countries, is characterized by an increasingly diversified set of actors who fully participate in international projects. Some of these actors include territorial unions, universities, associations, trade unions, individual enterprises, public institutions, etc. This tendency of institutions to expand into international cooperation is a representative characteristic of cultural and educational cooperation [Arzhanova 2011, p. 125]. Moreover, internationalization has evolved in higher education over the past 30 to 40 years from a marginal to a key aspect of the reform agenda. In that process, some traditional values have been lost, and past priorities have been replaced by others [de Wit, Deca 2020, p. 3]. As for the internationalization in global context, comprehensive internationalization is described as a “strategic, coordinated process that seeks to align and integrate international policies, programmers, and initiatives, and positions ... universities as more globally oriented and internationally connected”.<sup>1</sup>

Student mobility in higher education is rapidly increasing. Ever more students are doing part of their studies abroad, not only in the neighboring countries, but also far away at the universities in other continents [Marambe et al. 2012, p. 300]. But in the last year the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is significant in international higher education, especially student mobility: due to the outbreak of COVID-19 worldwide, universities all over the world have been forced to suspend the programs for students studying aboard as well as accepting international students. That is why developing students’ online mobility as an alternative plan, faculty members from Kansai University<sup>2</sup> (Japan, Osaka) and F.M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University<sup>3</sup> (Russia, Omsk) commenced an online inter-cultural exchange program.

## Project idea and goal

Currently students all over the world no longer require a reason for studying intercultural communication, as the need for skills in this area is a part of conventional wisdom. There are various reasons to study culture and communication, such as personal growth, social responsibility, economic motive, cross-cultural travel motive, media motive, etc. [Baldwin et al. 2013]. The need for intercultural competences is underlined when we examine the response to challenges within multicultural communities. The need to cooperate bridges together group through appropriate skills

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<sup>1</sup> See: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. (2014). Canada’s universities in the world: AUCC internationalization survey. <https://www.univcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/internationalization-survey-2014.pdf> P.3. (accessed: 21.06.2021).

<sup>2</sup> Kansai University (関西大学), abbreviated as *Kandai* (関大), is a private non-sectarian and coeducational university located in Suita, Osaka. Founded in 1886, it belongs to the old education system universities and is one of western Japan’s four leading private universities.

<sup>3</sup> F.M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University (OmSU) since its founding in 1974 has earned reputation as a leader in multifunctional research, teaching, and cultural complex and ranked the best university in Omsk region. OmSU embraces its connections to the world and develops international relations with the universities of Europe, the USA, Mexico, Japan, China, Kazakhstan and other countries.

needed to reinforce the capacity of global citizens for learning to live together [Lianaki-Dedouli, Plouin 2017]. The components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a given society [Byram et al. 2001, p. 5].

Noting the fact that the goals of higher education are remarkably similar across different national systems of higher education regardless of the cultural setting, they seldom differ on goals that include the promotion of independent learning and critical thinking [Kember, Gow 1990]. Recalling the sudden and unprecedented shift to online teaching as a response to human immobility, the need to continue teaching and learning activities and to engage and motivate students remained of pivotal importance. As such, faculty members from Kansai University and F.M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University started to use the online exchange platform *Flipgrid* for developing language learning of students and students' intercultural exchange.

When preparing the present paper, it was found that similar activity was described by Lee Lina, who reported about a Spanish-American intercultural exchange through which learners used asynchronous video discussions to exchange cross-cultural perspectives<sup>4</sup> [Lee 2020, pp. 262–282]. Another similar project was conducted in September 2020, when MIPT teachers, together with the University of Iowa, launched an international cultural and communication project<sup>5</sup> [Zatesa, 2020, pp. 55–56]. Using the *Flipgrid* platform, the students posted videos they recorded on a given topic, watched videos made by other students and commented on them in the format of a video message. As far as we can see, researchers and university teachers have been integrating *Flipgrid* into their classrooms in a variety of ways, improving students' foreign language skills and communication skills. But we could not find similar inter-cultural projects in collaboration with Japanese universities. The relevance of our online inter-cultural project was the necessity to shift the emphasis in the foreign language learning process from studying the language, its grammatical and lexical features towards practical-oriented learning targeting the development of intercultural communication of the students. In other words, we tried to help students to become more competent communicators – to work on “dialogue” skills by trying to engage in true dialogue (to work on speaking and listening skills) and to become interpersonal allies with people from other culture [Martin, Nakayama 2009, p. 480].

Both Universities take a multi-dimensional approach to reflect and incorporate the rich diversity of the world and, therefore, that is why the curriculum focuses on international society, countries, and regions, but the study of the issues therein requires proficiency in the language of the country or the region involved. For this reason, the faculty members emphasize intensive training in practical language abilities to encourage students to become highly proficient in the languages of their choice. So incorporated into the pursuit of academic qualification, students will use the languages to study topics related to their special interest, such as linguistics, human geography, multilateral groupings or trading blocs, and international civil society. Also, the fact is that Japan and Russia are close neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, which also justified this project for intercultural collaboration of students of the two universities. That is why the *main goal for the project participants is not simply to become fluent in the language, but rather to master the uses of the language as tools for better understanding the world, and for communicating with people as*

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<sup>4</sup> The study involved 37 university students.

<sup>5</sup> The study involved 30 students from the Russian and American Universities – 14 of them were MIPT students.

they work together to create better understanding of the world they live in. In other words, to develop the promotion of intercultural dialogue through online communication based on foreign language learning. As a result, a decision was made to open an online Russian-Japanese project at both universities starting April 2021. The *Flipgrid* platform for exchange between Japanese students studying Russian and Russian students studying English was set up, with a total of 68 students from the mentioned universities participating. Two topics were discussed on the platform: “*Russia-Japan – national cuisines (Do you like cooking?)*” and “*Show me your home-city*”. First project was launched from 19 April to 19 May 2021 and the second one – 20 May – 20 June 2021.

Students were asked to make video presentations on the given topics. Japanese students uploaded video clips accompanying them in Russian, Russian students – in Russian and dubbed them in English. After posting an introductory video, students were required to view and respond (in video-format) to participants with thorough responses. At the end of each project, each video was rated and then an online survey on participation in the project was conducted on the *Google* platform. The survey questions that participants were asked were purposely inserted to two research projects. Questions within the two projects investigated the online Russo-Japanese international projects’ role in furthering intercultural communication and the international collaboration experience of students of the mentioned universities received in the context of distant learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As mentioned above, one of the projects was called “*Russia-Japan – national cuisines (Do you like cooking?)*” The results of this survey became the subject of analysis in the present work. It is, however, important to appreciate why it was decided to use this theme. Food is one aspect of public diplomacy that seems to be sufficiently non-serious but yet sufficiently influential and has the tendency to influence many people in the simplest way. It is a fact that national cuisine is considered a brand that highlights the identity of a particular country. As such, food can be used as tool for public diplomacy [Solleh 2015, p. 162; Nye 2004]. Embedded within this theme is the understanding of food as being an important aspect of cultural and ethnic identity and the favorite type of cooking method as a way to encourage conversation about food practices within the groups. Further, it has been established that food can influence individuals to have a better impression towards a nation and is also able to change one’s perception of it [Solleh 2018, p. 190; Nye 2004].

### Posed question

According to Brant Burluson [Burluson 2009], interpersonal communication is defined as social interaction based on producing and interpreting messages to create shared meanings, and to accomplish desired social goals. All communication is situated in some context, and people come together across cultures for personal and/or professional purposes. These cultural and acculturative contexts include and affect multiple variables, including, but not limited to: ethnic/racial minorities, religions, immigrants, refugees, migrant laborers, business travelers [Gamst et al. 2011]. Contextualizing these variables are volitional intent (e.g., travel/study abroad), fluidity (e.g., immigration to a new country), socio-demographics (e.g., occupation/education), and similarity (e.g., linguistic or cultural). Within, this context, intercultural communication competence influences effectiveness (i.e., goal accomplishment) and appropriateness (i.e., exhibiting appropriate behavior) [Arasaratnam, Banerjee 2011], with the goal of producing the desired cross-cultural communication outcomes of adaptation (i.e., altering one’s behavior due to the environment) and

adjustment (i.e., mood states like self-esteem, stress, and self-confidence that accompanies adjustment) [Lieberman, Gordon 2011; Matsumoto, Hwang 2013]. Analyzing data obtained, we will try to answer the question: *How does students' perception of the goal of the online Russo-Japanese international intercultural project affect their motivation or participation in the project, and their evaluation of the achieved result?* To answer this question, we begin by taking a closer look at the project.

### General information on the survey

The majority (4) of questions in the survey were closed questions; respondents had to choose between certain options. However, there were also two open-ended questions, which gave respondents the opportunity to comment on the most important thoughts about their new experience encountered while participating in the project. These questions allowed participants to express their opinion on how they could successfully communicate with their foreign peers and the opportunities that they believe may be accrued from new knowledge about a foreign country and learning the language.

The sampling group of this study included Kansai University students and OmSU students. As many as 76.47 % of the respondents (i.e., 52 students) provided responses to these questions, and the key trends were identified.

In May 2021, the questionnaires<sup>6</sup> for the first project “*Russia-Japan – national cuisines (Do you like cooking?)*” were distributed online through *Google Forms* to the above-mentioned groups of students. After organizing the collected data, descriptive analysis was applied to examine and demonstrate the survey participants' attitudes to the intercultural online project. The results and conclusions are presented in the following sections.

### Major findings

Recently, courses within different universities' online programs started to utilize *Flipgrid* as a way for students to get to know each other and to communicate. The objectives of the assignments of our project were indicated as follows: students would share presentational videos on defined topics and collaborate with their colleagues from the university abroad to grow their online learning community. *Flipgrid* usage is based on the assumption that everyone has a camera readily available but being recorded does not always convey the same feeling as addressing others in person. So, we expected that, through the use of *Flipgrid*, students would be encouraged to make connections with foreign peers, and to use those connections throughout their course and this technology helped us to create a warmer online environment [Agan et al. 2019, p. 37]. Hall and Buzwell (2013) (as cit. in Stoszkowski 2018) noted that students who tended to be quiet in physical classes were more engaged in discussions when conducted on the platform and preferred watching their peers speak on the platform over “boring” written material [Stoszkowski 2018, p. 3].

The majority of students expressed a positive attitude towards participation in such online communicative projects. We found that 88.6 % respondents expressed interest in participating in the above-mentioned project, while only 11.4 % would not consider taking part in future projects.

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<sup>6</sup> The questionnaires were both in Japanese and Russian languages and students responded in Japanese and Russian respectively.

Just over half of the students (51.4 %), have had some difficulties with recording their video. In their comments, these participants wrote that they “realized the difficulties of shooting a video on their own,” “editing and posting the video,” “difficult thing was in shooting video, placing the camera and speaking Russian,” and, finally, “shooting a video while cooking was very difficult because cooking with a smartphone in hand is even a little bit dangerous.”

25.7 % of the participants had some problems in recording Russian and English comments while recording their video. As they reported in the online questionnaires, the main reasons for these problems were using a non-native language (grammar, pronunciation, expression of thoughts) while narrating the video. Japanese students emphasized that it was “difficult to make a presentation video about cooking and explain the recipe in a language other than the native language”, they “had difficulties in pronunciation of the words” and some of them “were disappointed that had had a lot of pronunciation mistakes”. Also, 20 % of the students had difficulties with both video and commentary recording.

#### *Familiarity with new dishes and other culture*

The majority of participants, 54 % and 46 % of Kansai University and OmSU students respectively, highlighted the central position of food in their responses and the new experiences they gained in this project.

As for Japanese students, they found “the process of cooking different Russian dishes” very interesting, they “could see various Russian food” and “could learn different Russian dishes and different ways of cooking”. Some of the students mentioned that “it was the first time getting to know in detail the dishes they had only seen before.”

As for Russian students, we should mention that Japanese cuisine has established itself so firmly in Russia that sometimes the young generation in Russia suggest that it is simple as far as actual cooking is concerned, healthy, low in calories, and delicious. Japanese cuisine is popular in Russia, and so Russian students have had a great interest in the cooking and preparation of Japanese dishes, they “liked to observe Japanese students’ cooking”, suggesting an added authenticity was communicated by being cooked by Japanese. That “new dishes were quite simple and tasty” and that they “really liked it” were the comments of prominence.

We found that Japanese students rated Russian students’ food cooking over that of their own traditional cooking, but there were no such comparisons or ratings discernable in Russian students’ responses. Japanese students were surprised that “not only in Russia, but also in Japan there was a recipe for cooking rice in a saucepan instead of a rice cooker” and added that “recently, few Japanese cook in a saucepan, so they found it unusual.” Some of them liked the video of cooking rice because “it was easy to understand – in the Japanese tradition of cooking, there is a similar method of cooking”. Also, they emphasized, that “there were many unique and unusual Russian dishes they had seen in the project for the first time,” but, at the same time, some participants shared their opinion, that “in comparison with Russian, Japanese food looked delicious too” and they “would like to taste dishes of Russian cuisine someday.” But there were also some funny responses such as this one: “My favorite recipe was “Fried pork with potatoes and wasabi and mayonnaise” cooked by one girl-student. First of all, I was surprised at the advent of the Japanese ingredient on video – wasabi. And when I had seen a lot of mayonnaise in that dish, I understood that the rumor

that ‘Russians love mayonnaise’ is really true. However, I wanted to understand: did she put the vinyl bag in the oven in a rush? If this recipe is correct, I’m wondering why vinyl won’t melt.”

The students of both universities were interested in the recipes of the dishes that had been cooked by their foreign peers. They found the food healthy, tasty, and attractive, and reported that the video motivated them in their desire to cook these dishes on their own:

—“I loved the recipe of chocolate muffin with yogurt – it looked so healthy and delicious” or “Chocolate muffins look very appetizing. I felt like it was easy to cook, so I wanted to cook them too.”

—“There were many delicious recipes, but the pancake recipe I liked the most of all because it was so easy to understand and I could try to cook it myself.”<sup>7</sup>

—“Other people’s cooked food looked delicious and I would like to cook something what I think I can cook. The most delicious was the apple pie.”

—“I could not decide which dish looked better, as each dish looked delicious. I’ll try something I can ‘easy to cook’ at home, adding my own arrangements.”

—“I liked the cottage-cheese pancakes! I had wanted to know how to cook it, so I was glad to see the recipe,”<sup>8</sup> etc.

Some participants stated that they realized that cooking was an interesting activity and explained that they would try to develop their skills in the matter presented, and would try to cook something new themselves.”

Both Japanese and Russian students enthusiastically discovered recipes for their national dishes that were prepared by their fellow countrymen as follows: “My favorite recipe is *sukiyaki*. The reason is that I really like them too,” or “In this project, I could see something unfamiliar to me and Russian cuisine, and it was also interesting to see the food that my group-mates had cooked.”

But it is interesting to note some (both Japanese and Russian) students’ preference for cooking fast food. It is seen by us as a skill that younger generation have developed, while it is notable that participants perceive this negatively too by using the phrase “lazy to cook”. For example – on a video there were shown soups which require only gentle heating before consumption (as it had been presented by Japanese students) unlike the laborious cooking methods of traditional dishes. Russian students also mentioned “acquaintance with another culture through cooking” and “the opportunity to learn more about foreign culture “as a positive moment of communication in the project.”

#### *Communication with peers from other country*

Communication with peers representing another country was seen by the students of both universities as a very important and pleasant bonus they had got from participating in the project. Communication with students of another country was referred to by every second Japanese respondent (48 %):

—“I have never had the opportunity to speak with foreigners, so the opportunity to speak via video was a very good experience!”

<sup>7</sup> *Crepes* are a very popular in the world. However, foreigners consider them to be a desert which shall be served with jam or syrup. *Crepes* with meat, caviar or any other rich filling seem to be rather weird in their opinion

<sup>8</sup> Cottage-cheese pancakes are *Syrniki*. Some foreigners do not grip an idea of frying cottage cheese at first; however after tasting it, they get fascinated.



—“I was able to hear real stories of my peers from another country!”

—“Since I rarely have the opportunity to interact with Russian people, it was a very pleasant and good experience. I was glad to see in the comments on my video a Russian student who said that I had a nice smile!”

—“Since I could really communicate with Russian students, I can continue to study Russian with great enthusiasm.”

—“It was very enjoyable to interact with Russian students through video.”

—“I was able to really communicate with them!”

—“Next time I would like to communicate more actively by commenting-answering.”

—“I could see my group-mates and Russian students through a video, as opposed to an avatar picture, so it was more of a personal connection.”

—“I was able to respond in person, who made it a better experience than reading typed words on a page,” etc.

But, in comparison with Japanese students, 93 % of Russian participants of the project emphasized “communication with Japanese peers” (new people, representatives of another country, foreigners, students of another country, Japanese people, residents of another nation) as a major factor of interest in this project, explaining that “communication is the key to knowledge.” Russian respondents emphasized that they “had never done anything like this and it was really fun to communicate with representatives of another country with a culture completely different” from their culture. Respondents wrote that “communication with peers from another country gave them irreplaceable communication skills,” they “enjoyed talking to other people” and “it helped to get new knowledge about culture of Japan”. Also, Russian students noted that “it was nice to receive comments and see deep interest in the eyes of others (foreigners)” and they also considered it “an opportunity to continue interaction and communication after finishing the project.” Moreover, Russian participants stressed “responsiveness and openness of Japanese students” and “openness to communication (dialogue).”

#### *Positive experience of participation in the project*

The goal of participating in the project for some students was the expansion of professional competencies in the use of a foreign language. Choosing the goal of improving skills in foreign language, the students spoke about their foreign language improving, which refers to the development of competence. Since the process of developing of foreign language competencies in this case was more important than the result, the students noted a high degree of interest in the project and constant self-motivation throughout the project.

#### *Positive experience of understanding*

Findings show that 20.3 % of the students made comments highlighting the fact that they were able to improve various Russian skills (Japanese students) and English skills (Russian students), such as speaking, and had been able to make a presentation and expressed their satisfaction with participating in the project. Responses such as, “When I listened to the living Russian language of native Russians, I began to understand better what they were speaking about,” “I began to speak more clearly,” “I learned how to adapt my video in two languages for the appropriate audience, so that I can be understood,” “less fear of speaking English in front of the

camera,” “I have had an opportunity to practice to make a speech,” or this one: “It was difficult for me to explain what ingredients are necessary for *miso soup* because these ingredients can be found only in Japan. I was worried how to explain it to Russian students, but I was glad that some of them liked it.”

Some students noted that “new knowledge about foreign culture and cuisine will help them to learn foreign language with new motivation in the future.” It is likely that the focus of these students on the process of work in the project is due to the fact that they rated their participation in the project as quite successful:

—“It was difficult because I rarely cook. However, the cooking was fun and delicious. I also enjoyed trying to cook the beautiful dish and I was worrying about what angle the video was shot from.”

—“I cooked *tamagoyaki*. There were very simple ingredients and it was easy to cook, but I was very worried because I didn't know how to explain it in Russian. But when I saw the comments on my video, it seemed to me that I was able to tell more than I had expected, so I was relieved.”

—“I cooked *takoyaki* and I was glad that students from Omsk commented on this. However, I was disappointed that I could not answer the question exactly.”

—“It was difficult to explain in Russian how to cook while cooking and shooting the video. However, I was glad to receive a decent response from Russian students. Russian students shot also English versions of presentations, so even if I didn't understand something in Russian, it was easy to understand the meaning while listening to it. I hope this practice will be continued.”

—“Some Russians are very interested in the food I cooked. I presented *Ochazuke* because I like it! I shot my video hoping that Russian students would like to know that *Ochazuke* is delicious!”

### Discussion

The recent crises in international relations have created tensions in communication and hindered the achievement of understanding between societies. Under these complicated circumstances, young people are not just objects of public influence but also agenda-setting actors capable of learning and acting on the basis of knowledge about the international situation [Zhilina 2018a, p. 63]. That is why understanding one's own culture and understanding cultures as human constructions are both necessary steps in learning to cope with intercultural interactions, and usually precede learning about people, cultures, and other ways of being.<sup>9</sup> To be a successful international communicator, it is not sufficient to only make progress in foreign language proficiency. It is necessary to develop other global competencies, such as intercultural and interpersonal communicative and digital competence, and integrate them into a common set of skills that can be used for international cooperation.

Taking into consideration the fact that culture is an important and related factor in this project, and that the formative context of the Russo-Japanese project study generated purpose and interests that helped students recognize the requirements for, and benefits of technology-enabled self-access activities, we also tried to answer the question: *Regarding the students decision to participate and*

<sup>9</sup> For more details, see: Intercultural Competences – Conceptual and operational framework. P. 27. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000219768> (accessed: 21.06.2021).

*their final evaluation of the achieved result, how did their initial perception of the goal of the project influence their decisions?*

Present study shows that, in the project “*Russia-Japan – national cuisines (Do you like cooking?)*”, food not only contributes to students’ identity and communicates a sense of social belonging, but that it also contributes to the construction of national identities and that national cuisine is one of the symbols that show how nations position food as a part of the national identity. Food, as a metaphor of the nation, thus provides a promising referential framework through which a sense of belonging is communicated [Walravens, Niehaus 2017]. So, in such an inter-cultural project, the promotion of both Russian and Japanese national cuisines can be easily applied as instruments [Nye 2004].

It was found that cross-cultural food practices were prevalent amongst our participants (students of Kansai University and OmSU), but the decisions to cook one dish or another for a presentation video were influenced by multiple factors. Namely, national tradition, convenience, and variety guided participants’ decisions to not choose cross-cultural food, but rather their own culture’s dishes.

We sought to better understand how project members from different cultures synchronize their worldviews and modify their communication patterns to adapt to one another on both the interpersonal level and the intergroup-intercultural communication level [Ting-Toomey 1989, pp. 175-176]. Such intercultural group projects are also providing students with valuable team working skills [Hansen 2006]. Furthermore, as the make-up of student communities becomes more diverse and individualistic, the group work provides students with the ability to not only work and learn together, but also to learn about each other [Aggarwal, O’Brien 2008; Webb 1997]. This belief is not only held by academics, but students have also stated that they believe group work to be valuable and to have many benefits [Lima et al. 2007].

Analyzing the relationship between perceptions of educational goals and motivations for participating in these projects from both Japanese and Russian students, we found that most of the students considered “communication with representatives of another country” as a significant bonus to the opportunity of language skills improvement. We can see that the participants’ attitudes involved curiosity and openness towards the other, readiness to revise cultural values and beliefs, to interact and engage with others, and, through the creation of common value system, eventually reach a positive outcome for both parties’ communication. Summarizing the results of the study, we can say that the perception of the purpose of participation in the project by students was different, but students of both universities mentioned “cross cultural communication” as a strong motivating factor for their participation in the project.

### **Impact of the Project**

In an increasingly global and mobile society, people are faced with greater cultural diversity both in their professional and private lives and, as a result of this, more and more emphasis is being placed on the need for intercultural awareness, adaptation, and respect for cultural differences [Léon-Henri, Jain 2017]. As far as we could see, the most significant outcome from the project was the collaboration between the students of two universities Kansai (Japan) and OmSU (Russia) as well as working together to improve cross-cultural knowledge and target languages’ skills. Also, the study suggested that our online inter-cultural exchange project had been essential to promote active

interaction of students to develop their interpersonal and intercultural communicative competence. At the initial stage, both Japanese and Russian students were afraid that they would look unconvincing because they were unfamiliar with their peers' culture and had not enough practice in languages, but, through *Flipgrid* communication, through intercultural relationships, students acquired important inter-personal and inter-cultural skills. Feedback from this project has been positive with participants commenting favorably on both the relevance of the model of effective language practice, as well as the significance of international communication. The most interesting result of this project was that the students of both countries not only answered the questions posed in questionnaires, but actively expressed their opinions on their video presentations and the presentations of other participants, analyzed the videos, complimented and posted "likes", and they began to communicate outside of the project.

One cannot overestimate the importance of a country's image abroad. National images, in fact, are one part of a state's soft power and play important role in international relations. In this connection, we should mention that, in this project, intercultural relationships (which are characterized by cultural differences in communication style, values, and perceptions) also helped to break the stereotypes towards the countries and the young people of these countries which the students had held before.

Besides, owing to the mentioned project, positive component of the nation's brand for Japanese students who linked their representation of Russia with Russian cuisine helped them associate Russia through visual narration. In these sequences, as well as others, the students' emotional reactions are typically captured in the visual presentation of Russia. When Japanese students visualize, they use images, symbols (e.g., pictures, etc.), and other forms of mental coding to represent experiences and information [Zhilina 2018b, p. 60].

Moreover, the years of 2020–2021 were declared Japan-Russia years of regional exchanges – years of Russian-Japanese cultural exchange between the two nations. Within the framework of these Years in Japan and in Russia a series of cultural and academic events in Japan based primarily in Tokyo, but also featuring events at venues throughout Japan, were held with the aim of introducing the many facets of Russia to the Japanese people. We think that our project could also help to deepen mutual understanding between the young generation's representatives – university students, which will serve as a way of improving country image and the foundation for new partnership between our universities and, on a larger scale, between our countries. In this connection we would like to propose launching similar projects in the coming year.

### Conclusion

The analysis of this example of students' intercultural collaboration on the basis of the Internet platform *Flipgrid* shows great potential for increased intercultural understanding and dialogue through a realization of intercommunication between students of different countries under the restrictions caused by the pandemic. Sustained and supported intercultural contact creates opportunities for individual and collective reflection, creative collaborations, cooperative action, and educational transformation. Taken together, such activities promote deeper understanding of the local-global connection and form the potential for building partnerships based on reciprocity.

Internationalization offers an opportunity to establish collaborative and ethical partnerships. In turn, increased understanding may result in a reciprocal improvement of educational research and

practices. In this way, education may come to employ collaborative practices that result in the complimentary growth of multicultural understanding and increased collaboration on an international level in higher educational institutions. Principled practices for the internationalization of education create opportunities for collaborative knowledge production, exposure to different contexts and worldviews, more complex and nuanced analyses, and improved capacity to respond to change and diversity.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, while the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the internationalization of higher education, the trend of online international mobility might become a new permanent feature of higher education even after the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, there are some limitations inherent in our study: the sample size was relatively small because it was the first time we implemented such educational projects, and the duration of each launched project was only one month. But obtained data, after careful codification and analysis, offers useful insights for understanding the subject matter under review. As we see, during the period of restrictions caused by the pandemic, the task of improving of the skills of intercultural interaction can be solved through the participation of students in such international educational projects via Internet platforms.

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