Let Learners Talk with Native Speakers Outside the Classroom in Your Home Country: Community Involvement Project[1]

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Study abroad is often promoted as one of the best ways to acquire the target language outside the classroom. However, only a small number of learners have such opportunities to visit the country of their target language and immerse themselves in the language and culture. In order to bridge the gap between formal classroom instruction and real language use, creative teachers have been seeking various kinds of resources outside the classroom in their surrounding community as well as, more recently, resources which can be accessed through technology. Besides the technology, one of the most highlighted resources discussed in the literature is the use of native speakers (NSs) in the community. Nonetheless, to present, few studies are available demonstrating the benefits to the learners when interaction with NSs is integrated as a part of the language course.

    This paper reports findings of a Community Involvement (CI) project carried out at Griffith University in Australia over the last three years. All learners enrolled at an intermediate-low level had one-to-one interaction with their matched NS volunteers in Japanese. They met for a minimum of ten hours during one semester outside the classroom. Post-course questionnaires were collected from both learners (n = 92) and NSs (n = 60) to examine the benefits and effectiveness of the project. Results indicate that both the learners and NSs enjoyed the project immensely. Most learners and NSs agreed that

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learners' speaking and listening skills and cultural understanding had improved as a result of the participation in the project. Some materials used in CI are presented, and guidelines for implementing CI in the course are also suggested.

1 Introduction

Many learners list speaking ability as one of their primary goals for learning the language. This accords well with communicative language teaching approach. Under communicative language teaching approach, interaction, conversation, and language use are emphasised, rather than learning about the language (Lightbown and Spada, 1993). In communicative language classes, student-to-student interaction in pair and small-group work and student-centred activities are common practice. Thus, communicative language teaching is said to provide realistic (close to the reality of language use) and motivating language practice so that learners can acquire language skills to communicate effectively in real life situations with native speakers (Ondarra, 1997).

However, one of the major concerns of teaching a foreign language (FL) within the communicative language teaching curriculum is the relatively low levels of students' oral communication skills, compared to those of written skills. For many learners, when a language is taught in a FL setting, exposure to the target language (TL) is mainly limited to the classroom. In reality, not all learners have the opportunity to visit the country or use the language with native speakers (NSs)[2]. To practise conversation, teachers may suggest that learners find language partners outside the classroom, hoping that this will solve the problem. Nonetheless, when the learners do not have a high level of proficiency and confidence in their TL, few of them will seek opportunities to interact with NSs independent of the language curriculum (See Dörnyei, 1990; Kurtz and Luna, 1983; Ogawa, 1998; Yorozu, 2001.).

In her book called *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice*, Savignon (1997) highlights that "a successful second language program consists of more than a textbook and classroom study" (p. xii). She stresses that "once the goal is communication, a second language program must be seen as one that *encourages students to move from the classroom to the second language world beyond and back again to the classroom*" (ibid., emphasis added).

In this paper, Community Involvement (CI) approach, where FL learning is enhanced by moving beyond and in the classroom, is discussed. CI is an approach which builds in regular interaction by learners with NSs of the surrounding

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[2] Thomson and Iida (2002) found that among 704 learners of Japanese at six Australian universities, 50 percent of them had little contact with NSs, followed by 28 percent with occasional contact. They also revealed that 50 percent of those who had studied Japanese between 2 and 4 years had never visited Japan and 27 percent stayed less than a month when they had the opportunity.

community as an integral part of language teaching (Ingram, 1978a). This approach is different from the "immersion programme" offered at Monash university in Australia, where TL is the medium of instruction to teach certain themes, e.g., Japanese education and Japanese food, by inviting participation of NS experts in the community (See more in Ozaki and Neustupny, 1986.). On the other hand, CI focuses on social interaction with NSs in the community at a personal level. Thus, TL is used outside the classroom as a medium to become acquainted with each other; to build friendship by sharing views, emotions, values, and cultures; and to participate in activities with NSs in the community. During the interaction, the TL is adapted to the learners' level of language to facilitate communication. With CI approach, what learners experience and learn outside the classroom with their NS partners becomes the centre of the teaching curriculum. Therefore, work inside the classroom becomes secondary: to support and enhance communication with NSs.

First, the background to the CI project is discussed, followed by a brief overview of integration of CI into intermediate-low Japanese course. Then the results of questionnaires[3] administered to the learners and NS volunteers and guidelines for the CI project are suggested.

2   Background to CI

2–1 Native Speakers in the Community as a Resource in Foreign-Language Course

In an FL environment, in which the language is not used for daily survival and communication, there are relatively few TL and cultural resources available. Many teachers attempt to encourage learners to be involved in the community by taking them on excursions, organising language exchange programmes, bringing in guest speakers and visitors from the outside community, carrying out projects, such as home visits and interviews and so on (See more in Leaver, 1989; Neustupny, 1991; Oxford, 1994; Ozaki and Neustupny, 1986; Thomson, 1997; Ueki-Sabine, 1999.).

However, as Nunan (1988) pointed out, it is important for the teacher to structure outside activities in such a way that the *benefits are tangible and their relationship to the language-learning process is evident* (p. 105 emphasis added). Nunan (1988) stresses that when these community-based learning activities are built into a language course and managed appropriately, they can lead to significant language gains (p. 107).

Regular conversational interactions with NSs in the community were found to be very beneficial to learners in terms of both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects (Eisenchlas and Hortiguera, 1999–2000; Ingram, 1978a, 1978b, 1980; Kurtz and Luna, 1983; Stoller, Hodges and Kimbrough, 1995). There are three main effects

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[3] In this paper, the questionnaires were used to demonstrate the significance of the project from the learners' and NSs perspectives. However, in the future the author intends to present her research findings after the completion of her PhD thesis, where the learners' linguistic development and L2 confidence before and after the CI are examined.

on learners which were documented in the literature: linguistic, sociocultural, and affective benefits.

2–2 Linguistic Benefits

Linguistic benefits are predictable when the learners have opportunities to talk in TL with NSs. The learners can have abundant opportunities to interpret, express, and negotiate meaning in real life (Savignon, 1997). Direct interaction between learners and NSs provides opportunity for authentic linguistic input and feedback on the learner's performance through negotiation of meaning. Throughout conversations with non-proficient learners, NSs make modifications to their speech for comprehensible input (Gass and Selinker, 1994)[4] and modifications to interaction (Long, 1983)[5].

Long (1985) stresses that "comprehensible input" is important but that it alone is not sufficient for language acquisition to occur. Swain (1985) argues that "comprehensible output" is necessary because production pushes learners to strive towards being comprehensible to the interlocutor by reformulating their own deviant utterances. During the conversation with NS, one can predict that there will be plenty of opportunities for "comprehensible input" and, in particular, "comprehensible output" to happen.

Based on the observation of their students, Ingram (1980), Eisenchlas and Hortiguera (1999–2000), and Kurtz and Luna (1983) found a marked improvement in students' oral fluency and communicative competence when they had interaction with NSs.[6] The students in Ingram (1980) self-rated the most improved areas after CI as: ability to comprehend the spoken language and to speak, and range of vocabulary. The students in Stoller et al.'s (1995) study claimed that their fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and conversational strategies had improved when they had a minimum of 15 hours' conversation partner program during a semester.[7]

2–3 Sociocultural Benefits

Eisenchlas and Hortiguera (1999–2000) found that their students understood a variety of sociocultural phenomena better than when they did not have interaction with NSs. Through conversation, interview projects, and activities, learners not only access the target culture first-hand but also share the feelings, values, and

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[4] These include slow speech rate, louder speech, long pauses, simple vocabulary, repetitions, and elaborations (Gass and Selinker, 1994).

[5] Interaction modifications made by NSs are confirmation check, comprehension checks, clarification request, and selection of salient topics. NSs tend to modify interaction to avoid conversation trouble and to repair the discourse when non-understanding sequence occurs (Long, 1983).

[6] Kurtz and Luna (1983) reported that their students' conversation skills had improved following as little as two 15-minute one-to-one unstructured conversations over 10 weeks (5 hours in total) with Spanish-speaking senior citizens.

[7] Although this program was designed for ESL students in an intensive English course, the nature of the program was similar to the CI project.

attitudes of the NSs. Thus, it helps learners to reflect on their own culture and develops cultural awareness and sensibility (Ingram, 1978b). This personal experience and emotional involvement with the NS also seem to facilitate the learning process as Stoller et al. (1995) and Yorozu (2001) found in their study.

2–4 Affective Benefits

Affective benefits of interaction with NSs are equally important to linguistic and sociocultural benefits. In a large amount of second language acquisition research, affective factors, such as motivation and attitude for learning, risk-taking, self-esteem and confidence, have been suggested to influence the learning processes and outcomes to a great extent. Most researchers agree and most teachers intuitively know that students' attitudes and motivations have a great effect on their classroom achievement (Mantle-Bromley, 1995, 373). Then, in what way do motivation and attitudes change when students have opportunities to interact with NSs? First of all, opportunity to use the TL meaningfully and purposefully with NSs increases *motivation* for learning by demonstrating the immediate relevance of the language — the language is a meaningful tool for communication and interaction (Marshall, 1986; Savignon, 1997). Second, opportunity to use the TL with NSs can test students' actual proficiency (i.e., what they can and cannot do in the language) and can help them to evaluate their progress. By becoming aware of their current competence in the TL, students can make clear decisions about what to concentrate on to improve it. Thus, it *motivates* learners to study more. Third, if the interaction with NS is successful, this experience gives students further impetus to study (Yorozu, 2001).

Successful communication with NSs in linguistically "unprotected" situations (as opposed to language input which is carefully controlled by the teacher in the classroom) can result in gaining greater *confidence*. At the beginning of the interaction, the learners, particularly those who have had less experience in interacting with NSs, will worry if their TL is good enough to understand the NSs and to make themselves understood by the NSs who are non-teachers. However, when students realise that they can communicate with the NSs in the TL, the fear of being unable to communicate disappears (Ingram, 1978b). This repeated success in interaction with NSs can reinforce self-confidence in the language, and this may be a case in which "communicative confidence leads to communicative competence" (Savignon, 1997, 48).

So far, many researchers have focused on how NSs should be used for the learners since they see NSs as a tool for improving learners' linguistic and sociocultural competence. However, one cannot ignore the humanistic aspect of the NSs. Stoller et al. (1995) explain how the emotional and psychological support that NSs provide to learners facilitates learning. The learners in the conversation partner program said that they made new (NS) friends to talk and go out with who can share happiness and depression (Stoller et al., 1995). *Self-esteem* improves when students have their own NS partner, because NSs are casual, friendly, and non-judgemental of students' performance and accept them as whole human beings (Stoller et al.,

1995). Thus, this learning experience is usually non-threatening and comfortable for the learners, compared to speaking in the classroom,[8] and it creates room the learners to converse voluntarily (Kurtz and Luna, 1983; Long, 1997). This phenomenon may transfer to the classroom. For instance, as Ingram (1978b, 1980) and Eisenchlas and Hortiguera (1999–2000) noticed, students were more willing to converse and participate (viz., *risk-taking*) than they had previously been as a result of regular conversational interaction with NSs.

3   Community Involvement Project

The CI project was funded by the Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development for the three years between 2000 and 2002 with the amount of A$158,000. Six FLs offered at the School of Languages and Linguistics at Griffith University participated in the project. Among the six languages, Japanese had the largest number of learners and NS participants in the project.

The project aimed to improve learners' language proficiency and to enhance their cultural understanding through regular meetings with NSs to whom they were matched. It was mandatory to participate in the project for the learners enrolled in the Japanese intermediate-low level course. Throughout the project, the learners were required to use Japanese (i.e., English was not allowed to be used by either party) outside the classroom for communication with the NS partners. Before, during, and after the meetings, plenty of support and assistance was provided to the learners to overcome any difficulties. This was dealt with by means of discussion in small groups and consultations. The course was 20 credit points with 6 hours classroom contact per week. Half of the classroom contact is used to prepare for the meeting with the NS partners and half of the course assignments and assessments were related to the project. During the second semester, learners were required to meet their partners for at least 10 hours out of the classroom to interact in Japanese and to experience and learn first-hand about aspects of everyday culture.[9] The NS partners and learners normally met at public places in the city, such as a coffee shop and food court, at their houses and on campus, unless they had arranged special cultural activities.

3–1   Learners
There were a total of 92 learners who were enrolled and participated in the project

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[8] Speaking in the TL is constantly corroborated as the most anxiety-provoking aspect of learning a FL in classroom by numerous scholars (See, for example, Aida, 1994; Bailey, 1995; Cheng, Horwitz, and Schaller, 1999; Ely, 1986; Fukai, 2000; Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1991; Kanagy and Futaba, 1994; Kitano, 2001; MacIntyre and Charos, 1996; Madsen, Brown and Johns, 1991; Saito-Abbott and Samimy, 1997; Young, 1990.).

[9] The most popular cultural activities were: finding ingredients and cooking Japanese dishes, dining at a Japanese restaurant, watching Japanese movies/videos, singing at a Japanese karaoke bar, having a picnic at a Japanese garden in Brisbane, and showing Australian culture (e.g., Australian food and native animals).

over the three years (See Table 1.). The average age of the learners was 21.6 years and it ranged from 18 to 52. More than half of the learners were Australians, followed by those of Chinese background (See Table 2.). Most learners had normally studied Japanese for 2.5 years at university or a combination of 5 years or less at high school and 1.5 years at university. In regards to experience of living in Japan, the majority of the learners clustered at "none" or "less than a month" living experience in Japan, 65.2 percent (n = 60). On the other hand, 18.5 percent (n = 17) of the learners had "more than 6 months" stay in Japan (See Table 3.). As for the use of Japanese prior to the project, 44.6 percent (n = 41) of the learners had experience in using substantial Japanese apart from inside the classroom and 55.4 percent (n = 51) had little experience.

Table 1　Number and Gender of Learners

	2000	2001	2002	Total
Male	5	6	12	23
Female	26	15	28	69
Total	31	21	40	92

Table 2　Background

	2000	2001	2002	Total
Australian	17	10	23	50
Chinese	12	7	16	35
NZ	0	1	1	2
Others	2	1	0	3
Unidentified	0	2	0	2
Total	31	21	40	92

Table 3　Length of Stay in Japan

	2000	2001	2002	Total
None	14	8	15	37
Less than a month	6	7	10	23
More than a month	5	1	7	13
More than 6 months	3	1	6	10
More than a year	3	2	2	7
Unidentified	0	2	0	2
Total	31	21	40	92

3–2   Native-speaker Volunteers

Japanese NSs were recruited through local Japanese newspapers[10] and the Japanese Society's community newsletters prior to the semester.

The actual number of NSs involved in the project is presented below in Table 4. There was a slightly larger number of NSs than learners enrolled in the course. This is because some NSs had to withdraw from the project due to unavoidable circumstances during the project or some learners requested to meet more than one partner simultaneously. The NS population varied in their age, the makeup of their family and their residence status in Australia (See Table 5.). The population of Japanese NSs consisted of permanent residents or temporary visitors to Australia. The latter group included those with a work-related transfer, those studying at university as exchange students or studying at English school, on a working holiday, and retired pensioners.

Table 4   Number and Gender of NSs

	2000	2001	2002	Total
Male	6	7	8	21
Female	30	18	36	84
Total	36	25	44	105

Table 5   Resident Status

	2000	2001	2002	Total
Permanent	9	3	4	16
Work related	9	3	4	16
Student	10	12	29	51
Working Holiday	3	3	7	13
Unidentified	5	4	0	9
Total	36	25	44	105

3–3   Course Curriculum

The project was designed around interactions expected to take place between a learner and a Japanese NS who have never met before. First, a learner chose a NS partner from the list of registered NSs. After all the learners had chosen their partner, the learners received the copy of the NS's registration form including personal contact details. Teaching materials and assignment and assessment items

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[10] They were *Nichigo Press* and *the Southern Cross Times* distributed free in Queensland every month. The advertisement appeared in the community announcement column of the newspapers.

were closely linked to tasks and activities for interaction with NSs (Examples of tasks and activities are shown in Table 6.). Each week, new topics[11] to discuss at the meeting were introduced to the learners to stimulate the conversation (See task f.). However, these topics were merely suggestions and were not compulsory for the learners to use when they met the NSs. This is because, in the questionnaires, more learners repeatedly indicated that they did not want set topics (45.6 percent) than those who wanted them (38 percent). Another feature of the project was to experience culture through activities with NSs (See note 9). The learners had to plan and do, at least, an activity during one of the meetings. In class, this activity was introduced to the other learners when they gave an oral presentation (See task i.).

Table 6　Tasks/Activities Relevant to CI Project

Tasks/activities	Aims	Assessments
Preparation for the first contact		
a. Read NS registration/profile form.	Get to know the NS partner. Read the NS's handwriting. Learn expressions and style used in the form.	
b. Fill out own profile form.	Introduce the student to the NS. Practice to fill out form referring to task a.	First draft is checked by the teacher and returned to the student.
c. Write an introductory letter to the NS partner.	Introduce the student to the NS in a formal letter. Discuss appropriate way to address the partner and to write for the first contact.	**Letter writing test** The test is marked and checked by the teacher. Make fair copies of the profile and letter to send them to the NS.
d. Telephone the NS.	Practice telephone conversation for: arranging the first meeting. describing oneself to meet at the public place for the first time. cancelling/changing the appointment. expressing invitation. leaving a message on answering machine/voice mail.	**Telephoning role-play test** After the test, a mark and feedback are provided to the students to improve the telephone conversation. Then student calls the partner to arrange the first meeting.

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[11] For example, hometown, family, friends, lifestyle, university life, nostalgia, worries, future plans, and current affairs, such as the Sydney Olympics (2000), September 11 (2001), and the Bali bombing (2002) were introduced. Topics of conversation between the learners and NSs often tended to focus on daily events.

Preparation for meetings

e. Simulate visiting NS house.

Practice expressions for entering house and leave-taking.
Practice receiving/offering drink and/or food.
Discuss customs about taking off shoes before entering the house and gift-giving.

(This task is used as a part of the end of semester **oral examination**).

f. Select topics for interaction.

Prepare questions to ask NS for meaningful meeting.

(Some topics are used as a part of the **oral examination**).

g. Use strategies/techniques to enhance oral communication.

Practice strategies to comprehend NS talk (ask to repeat, slow down, clarification requests, etc.).
Practise strategies to compensate for linguistic deficiency in speaking (use of gestures, *mitai/yoona* to express similar words, paraphrasing, fillers etc.).
Practise *aizuchi* for enhancing listening techniques.
Practise interactional particles (e.g., *no*, *ne*, *yo*) to express feelings and emotional involvement in the conversation.

Interaction with NS

h. Have 10 hours of free conversation.

Enjoy and experience spontaneous conversation.
Know the partner well and build a friendship.
Increase confidence in Japanese.
Encourage autonomy and reflection on learning.

Journal writing (Appendix)
Students submit a written journal within a week after their meeting.
Before the meeting, some students write topics and questions to ask during the meeting. Students keep a record on topics they used, activities they did together, and reflection on learning (e.g., monitor, evaluate progress, and make decision about what to focus on in the next meeting).

Learn about Japan/Japanese and compare with the student's own country.
Take initiative in conducting an interview.
Reflect on their performance (e.g., use of *aizuchi* and strategies practised in task g.).

10-minute interview on any topic.
Students prepare questions to ask and steer the interview. They record the interview on a tape. After the interview, they listen the tape and write a report on their reflection.

i. Take part in cultural activities.

Experience and enjoy culture first-hand through activities.

5-minute oral presentation on "Learning Japanese through

		my Japanese partner". In class, students introduce their partner and show/display cultural activities they did together.
After interaction		
j. Share and discuss other students' experiences.	Increase awareness of strategies and their ability in communication and learning process.	Use comments in Journal writing as stimulant for the group discussion.
k. Plan and write an invitation to a thank-you party in small groups.	Express appreciation to NSs. Learn expressions and style used in the invitation card.	
l. Write a thank-you letter to NS.	Express appreciation to NS in a letter.	**Letter writing test** The test is marked and checked by the teacher. Make a fair copy of the letter to send it together with the invitation card to the NS.

4   Results of Questionnaires

At the end of the semester, two different types of questionnaires were administered. One was designed to investigate the learners' impressions of and usefulness about the project. All the students participated in the project (n = 92) filled out the questionnaire in the class. Another was designed to examine the NSs' perceptions about the project and students' performance during the meetings.

4–1   Learner Questionnaires (n = 92)
On average, the learners had a total meeting time of 12.2 hours, with a maximum of 56 hours and a minimum of 6.5 hours, and they met 5.7 times with the partners. When the learners were asked whether the total meeting time of 10 hours was reasonable, 92.3 percent of learners responded "yes" or "too short". Although 78.3 percent of the learners indicated that they wanted to meet with their partner every week, they met every fortnight on average. This seems to indicate that learners were tied up in other things during the semester despite their wish to meet frequently with the partner. In relation to the ideal length of a meeting, 47.8 percent replied "2 hours" and 33.7 percent replied "1.5 hours".

On the overall impression on CI project, 46.7 percent responded "excellent", 50 percent, "good" and 3.3 percent, "so so" (See Fig. 1 for more details.). These figures seem to indicate that the project did not only cater for those who had had less experience with NS but also who had had a lengthy stay in Japan and had interaction with NSs.

The learners were also asked to answer the questions on "How would you rate the experience in relation to improving the following skills? — speaking, listening, reading, writing, and cultural understanding" by selecting the answers from "extremely useful", "fairly useful", "not very useful" and "useless". Fig. 2 shows the
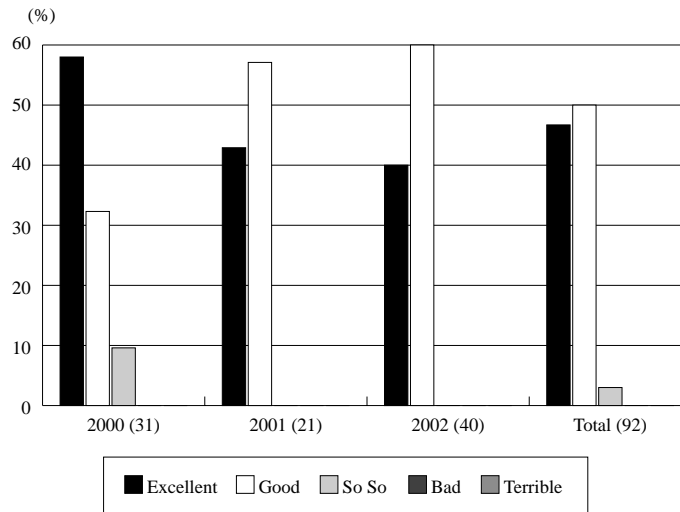
(%)

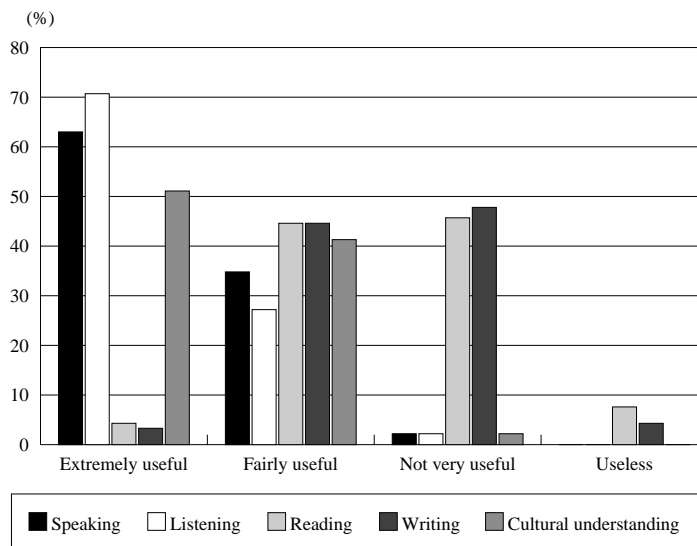Fig. 1   Impression on CI

(%)

Fig. 2   Perceived usefulness

response to the question. A staggering 97.8 percent of the learners replied either "extremely useful" or "fairly useful" in improving speaking and listening skills. Also 92.3 percent of the learners answered either "extremely useful" or "fairly useful" in improving cultural understanding. On the other hand, below 50 percent of the learners responded that it was "extremely" or "fairly" useful for reading and writing skills.

Furthermore, to elicit learners' various opinions on the project, open-ended questions were used. In regards to the *best thing about the project*, the most common

answers were "to make new friends with a Japanese people" (38 responses) exceeding "to speak Japanese" (22), "to interact with Japanese NS" (14), "to understand culture" (14) and "to be able to recognise an improvement in my Japanese" (4). One learner wrote, "Getting to interact with a native speaker and learning first hand about them, their culture and other things you don't get the opportunity to learn in the classroom." Other learner listed "being able to interact with a NS on a one-to-one basis about any chosen topic." Another learner wrote that speaking only Japanese was the best thing about the project. On the other hand, *the worst thing about the project* was clearly "to find the time to meet" (26) and followed by "the first meeting" (4), "to find things to talk about" (4), and "to record the interview on a tape" (3).

In order to review the project a few questions were developed. When the learners were asked whether the project should be kept running for the future learners, a staggering 95.1 percent responded "yes". One learner exclaimed in the comment section, "(The project was) fantastic!! The most fun I've had in Japanese — I think had it not happened, I probably would have quit Japanese. Thanks!!" Most learners also indicated that the ideal time for carrying out the project was the current intermediate-low (80.4 percent) followed by at beginning-high (39.1 percent) and intermediate-high (31.5 percent) levels. The majority of the learners, 91.4 percent, agreed that they would participate if the project were offered again next year. One learner expressed the desire to have a longer period on the project instead of one semester. The learner wrote, "Definitely continue [the project]. It is very worthwhile and enjoyable! Probably the most beneficial thing I have done for my Japanese speaking and listening skills since I have been learning. I think it should be offered all year through".

4–2　NS Questionnaires (n = 60)

The questionnaires were developed to solicit views on the project and the learners. They were either sent out by the learners (with a thank-you letter) or delivered directly by them to the NSs at the end of the semester. By that time, some NSs were already left Brisbane or the Gold Coast and responses could not be collected from them. A total of 60, which is more than half of the NSs, returned the questionnaires (22, 10, and 28 NSs in 2000, 2001, and 2002, respectively). The majority of those who responded to the questionnaires were females (n = 50) in the age bracket of 20s (33) and 30s (12). They were mainly housewives (17) and students (26) who were staying in Australia for the relatively short period of less than a year (32).

The reasons for participation were indicated by ticking multiple-choice answers. The most common answers were "to assist learners" (42 responses) followed by "out of interest" (34), "to meet Australians" (25), or "to meet other people" (25). It seems that the respondents were actively looking for opportunities to meet new people otherwise, it was not easy to become acquainted with those outside everyday circles. This is natural considering their length of stay in the country and that their life has little change, surrounded by the same group of people.

The strengths and weaknesses of the project were elicited in open-ended style

questions. The most common answers concerning the strength of the project were giving the students "the opportunity to talk to NS in Japanese" (17 responses), "learn things which cannot learned in the classroom" (7), "develop friendship with the learner" (6), and "learn culture/custom directly from the NS" (6). One NS expressed as follows:

> I think using language is quite different from what you learn from the textbook and practise in the classroom. In this respect, this project was really beneficial for the students. I wish I had a project like this when I was studying a foreign language in Japan. Having contact with foreigners, you have an access to their culture and feel their language much closer to your life.

In regards to the weakness of the project, there were a small number of comments. The main answers were "run out of things to talk about during the meeting" (8 responses) and "the project is too short" (7).

The NSs also indicated the areas in which they perceived the learners had improved during the project by ticking the boxes. A large number of the NSs thought that fluency, vocabulary, listening, sociocultural skills, and taking initiation in the conversation were the major improvements among the learners (See Table 7.). In the comment sections, some wrote further about the clear improvements among the students compared to the early stages of the project. One NS volunteer mentioned, "Even though grammar and words were inappropriate, I understood 90 percent of what my student was trying to say. I feel that the conversation flowed more smoothly than the beginning of the project . . . ." Another NS noted, "At the beginning, I had to make an effort to keep conversation going because of communication breakdown. However, half way through the project, the student showed more positive attitudes to continue conversation. I thought this was a sign of improvement." Another NS commented that, compared to the beginning of the project her student attempted to use a wider range of vocabulary and asked her more questions voluntarily when the meeting progressed. One said, "The more we met, the more my student started to ask me questions."

On the other hand, some NSs were reserved in answering the questions as they felt the project was too short to make a judgement on the learners' improvement. In response to the question of whether the project was beneficial for the learners, 32 (53.3 percent) NSs replied "very beneficial" while 25 (41.6 percent) replied "so so".

Similar to the learners' questionnaire, the prospects of carrying out future project

Table 7　Perceived Improvements among Learners

	Number	%		Number	%
Fluency	33	55.0	Writing	2	3.3
Grammar	6	10.0	Reading	1	1.7
Vocabulary	31	51.7	Sociocultural skills	31	51.7
Pronunciation	6	10.0	Initiation in conversation	26	43.3
Listening	31	51.7	Other	3	5.0

was asked. The result was overwhelming. Except for one person who answered "not certain", the remaining 59 (98.3 percent) NSs said "yes, continue the project". This result may need to be interpreted in relation to how the questionnaires were collected. It can be said that those who returned the questionnaires were the group of people who had already had a more favourable view towards the project than those who did not return the questionnaires. Therefore, such a positive response was obtained. However, a large number of NS volunteers expressed that the project was enjoyable and good experience for them and was not only beneficial for the learners but also for the NSs themselves. An NS volunteer mentioned:

> I thought that the project was beneficial for both of us. I experienced the time that I was unable to explain expressions that I use unconsciously and I was unable to answer questions on things about Japan. I found this experience was a good opportunity for me to reflect on Japanese and Japan. I am very grateful that I found a partner and had this precious experience. I am happy to help next year if you are having another project. Thank you very much.

Some NSs were appreciative of having the opportunity to become friends with the learners and even promised to keep in touch after the project. One NS said, "I am glad that I found a good friend. I met not only my partner but also my partner's family. We learned many interesting things from each other. After we go back to our own country [as the learner had come from another country to study in Australia], we are going to keep in touch." Another NS participant commented, "I felt fortunate that I was chosen from more than 100 volunteers who showed interest in the project. Since it is difficult for the ELICOS [English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students] students to become friends with university students (even I want to make new friends) while I am in Australia, I am glad that I had this opportunity. I enjoyed talking about the topic used in the 10-minute interview and cooking Japanese dishes together."

5   Guidelines for Implementing CI

Running a CI project involves extra work for teachers since they need to deal with not only learners but also an equal number of NS volunteers. The first year of the project was challenging and confronted by unexpected difficulties. To surmount these difficulties, some amendments were made in the areas of NS volunteer recruitment, communication with NSs, written journal, and classroom activity so that we could make the most out of the project.

To manage CI successfully and achieve the maximum outcome from interaction with NSs outside the classroom, the following four points need to be taken into account.

5–1   Find Sufficient NS Volunteers
First, to run the project teachers need to find sufficient NSs. A manageable size for CI is ideally less than 30 learners. To be on the safe side, it is recommended to have five extra volunteers in reserve for backup (cf. Tables 1 and 4 for the actual number

of NS participants and the learners.). It became clear that young Japanese are more willing to participate in the project than those who have lived for a longer period in Australia. In the first year of CI, we aimed to find Japanese families and permanent residents for the project. Despite repeated advertisements in the Japanese society's community newsletter, it was quite difficult to find these volunteers. In the following two years, when the advertisements appeared in two local Japanese newspapers (See note 10) in addition to the community newsletter, it was relatively easy to secure a sufficient number of NSs. In fact, more than twice as many NSs registered as the number of students enrolled. This is because many young Japanese subscribe to the newspapers. These Japanese are, in general, single and have more spare time but only have a short period of stay in Australia compared to those who have family and are established in Australian society.

When the learners choose their partners, the teacher should discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having different types of NSs as partners.[12] For instance, NS who has family or is a housewife will probably have spare time during the day on weekdays, while NS who is studying or working will prefer to meet in the evenings after study or work, or on weekends. Considering that "to find the time to meet" is a major obstacle for many learners, as found in the questionnaires completed by the learners, the timing of meetings is crucial for them. In the past, the learners prefered NSs who were similar in age,[13] and convenient meeting places. NSs who could meet on campus, close to the campus, or central public places in the city were more popular than those who lived far away and required travel for the meetings.

5–2 Make the Objectives and Rules of CI Clear to Both Learners and NSs at the Beginning

When the objectives and rules are not fully understood by the learners and NSs, problems arise. In the first year of CI, there were some problems and they were amended in the second year of the project. For example, a few learners thought their partners were private tutors. Most of their meetings were used to catch up on what the students did not understand in class or to prepare for assignments and tests. Thus, their meeting involved mainly explanations in English, and they rarely had social interaction in Japanese. Another case was that the NSs thought that they could practise their English as in a language exchange programme. They wanted to use English whenever they could, so when faced with communication difficulties, both learner and NS slipped into the habit of using English instead of trying out

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[12] They are those who are permanent residents vs. temporary residence, young and single people vs. family or older people, and ELICOS students with less proficiency in English but fairly new to the country vs. those who are proficient in English and lived many years in the country, and so forth.

[13] When matching the students and NSs in her language exchange programme, Ueki-Sabine (2003) suggested that sex and native speaker of English (i.e., Australian) were the major factors for Japanese NSs, followed by age and convenient meeting place.

various strategies. Therefore, the following rules were made clear at the start.

> **Rule 1: English is not allowed during the interaction.**
> The main purpose of the project is to speak and use Japanese when the learners interact with their NS partner. Thus, "comprehensible output" (Swain, 1985) is forced. The students need to practise to get the message across by trying various strategies without resorting to English. To deter participants from using English during the interaction, a written journal (Appendix) was used. Every time the learners meet the NS partners, they must get their partner to write comments and sign on the journal to verify that they actually met. In this section, we added a question where NSs assess English usage during the meeting (See Appendix.). This worked quite well, and both parties seemed to try very hard not to use English. If NS wanted to practise their English and the learner agreed to help, they did it after the meeting in Japanese, but this was not counted towards 10 hours (viz., 10 percent).

> **Rule 2: NS partner is neither private tutor nor teacher.**
> NS partners are to interact with the learners in Japanese, and they are not teachers who can explain Japanese grammar or help learners with their homework. NSs should avoid spending too much time explaining grammar during the meetings when the learners ask to explain or when they make mistakes. This can be done in the classroom when the teacher is present.

When learners cannot meet their partner, this places enormous pressure on learners. There were a several cases in the past where NSs were too busy to meet the learners or moved away from Brisbane. Having NSs who are on a working holiday as partners can create a level of risk. They are so mobile that if they find a job or change jobs, they may move away from Brisbane without much notice. If this occurred, another NS on reserve was assigned to the learner as backup.

> **Rule 3: NSs must be available during the project to meet with the students.**
> Meetings and other assignments are a part of the course. Learners need to meet a minimum of 10 hours to receive the 10 percent allocated and to complete assignments, such as the interview and oral presentation. To minimise the impact of this problem, NSs were asked to indicate whether they would be available during the project when they fill out a registration form.

In order to convey the objectives and rules of CI to the NS volunteers, an information seminar was provided before the semester. The learners were given this information in the first lecture. This seminar seems to be effective not only to provide information about the project but also to meet NSs to answer their queries

and to establish better communication. After all, without them the project can never be carried out, so it is fairly important to establish rapport with them at the start.

5–3   Provide Assistance to the Learners

During the project, learners should feel relaxed and enjoy speaking in Japanese with their partner. To do that, teachers have to provide linguistic and psychological support to the learners. Before the expected interaction occurs (e.g., making a telephone call, arranging the first meeting, visiting the house, thanking for the other day, asking permission to participate in an interview, etc.), it would be better for the teacher to provide plenty of opportunities to practise in class (See tasks/activities column in Table 6.). Since the learners must speak and use Japanese all the time, no matter how frustrating, nerve-wracking, or difficult it is, it is essential to equip them with strategies through practise in class (See g. in Table 6.). Especially, those who are less confident in their Japanese or believe that their Japanese is not good enough to communicate need plenty of help and encouragement.

The written journals (See Appendix.) and class discussions after the meetings are a good place to start for detecting any concerns and problems among the learners (e.g., enjoying the project, whether meeting regularly or not, having personality clashes, experiencing difficulty in arranging meetings, and detecting feelings associated with sense of failure in communication in Japanese). If the learner is having difficulty with the partner, the teacher can assign to another NS who is on reserve. If the learners are nervous before the first meeting, the teacher can suggest bringing photos with them. If they often run out of things to talk about and experience awkward moments, the teacher can provide learners with lists of questions to ask or topics they might want to discuss (See note 11 for various topics suggested by the teacher.), or activities they might want to engage in so that they can prepare before the meeting.

The journals and discussions were used not only to detect the problems but also to encourage learners to be reflective on their learning process. By making them aware of what they can do to improve the communication, the students are more focused on their learning and become more autonomous in their learning. Both in the journals and discussions, students often brought up how embarrassing it was that they had made mistakes and felt stupid in front of their partner. This feeling was eased by discussing in the class and accepting the fact that making mistakes is natural, as no one can be perfect from the beginning. By the end of the project, students learned from making mistakes and realised this was an important part of the learning process.

5–4   Integrate Assessment Items Effectively into the Course (See Table 6 for relationship between tasks/activities and assessments.)

As a rule, teachers should make the learning experience of CI a part of course assessment so that the learners will work hard. Most students have other subjects to study for their degree, and they have other commitments (e.g., part-time job to cover tuition fee and living expenses). If teachers do not force them to do so, the

learners are unlikely to complete the tasks no matter how beneficial the experience will be for them. For instance, a telephone conversation with an unacquainted Japanese is fairly challenging compared to face-to-face conversation. In the first year of the project, when the telephone role-play was just practised in the classroom and was not part of assessment, some students did not use Japanese when they called the partner. However, when the role-play was incorporated into the assessment in the second year of the project, they were well rehearsed and confident and did not have to use English when they called their partner.

It was obvious that the learners need incentive, i.e., marks, to meet NSs and to speak Japanese. In the project, the learners received 10 percent as long as they met with the NSs for a total of 10 hours and submitted the written journals to the teacher after each meeting. One learner said:

> I think it is a great idea, most students, including myself are reluctant to speak to natives. By making it assessment, it "motivates" the student. The matching of people to students also benefits the student; we don't have to be embarrassed approaching strangers and asking to practise Japanese.

Similarly, another learner commented as follows:

> It is hard to get motivated by yourself but when you have to do it for your study, it is not as difficult. I have found a new friend, yet I will be sad when it is finished as I will have to rely on my own determination and motivation to continue speaking Japanese constantly.

Cultural activities and reflective learning were encouraged during the project. However, these activities were not formally assessed in the first year of CI. By including a report on cultural activities into the oral presentation and one on reflective learning into the interview, this situation was improved. During the oral presentation, a cultural activity was presented to the class (See i. in Table 6.) when students talked about their partner. This made the presentation more lively and interesting to the audience because many learners enjoyed doing cultural activities with their NS partner (See note 9 for examples.). To promote reflection in learning, not only the interview (See h. in Table 6.) but also the report was assessed. The learners were required to use a recorded interview for collecting information from their NS partners as well as for them to listen to the tape to reflect on their performance and complete a written reflection.

In general, most assessments were well received by the learners. Some mentioned, in fact, that they enjoyed the assessments and found them useful. One learner claimed that:

> The project is set out really well — it's really good that our assessment items are related to our meetings (role-plays, speaking tests, oral presentation, letters). Because each week in class we learnt different sentences and things — it was more beneficial to learning because we actually used what we learnt — excellent!

One learner commented as follows:

> The assessment has been planned well, as it is more enjoyable and worthwhile when we are actually writing to a real person, having an interview with a friend about a topic we actually

want to know about, and performing a speech about a friend that everyone wants to know about!

Similarly, another learner pointed out that:

I like how all the assessment focuses around aspects of the project like the interview, speech, the written reports, letter-writing test, etc. It not only encourages students to study Japanese outside of tutorial hours extensively, but it also encourages interaction and the student getting to know their partner enough to talk about them. I think it is an incentive to learn!

CONCLUSION

CI can be managed effectively if teachers are ready to take extra efforts for arranging the project for their students. During the CI project, the opportunity to interact with NSs was offered equally to all learners in a FL environment. Outside the classroom, the learners used Japanese as a tool for communication, accessed socio-cultural information at first hand, shared feelings, values, and views and developed friendship with their NS partners. Although further study is needed to determine whether learners had linguistic gains while participating in the project, both questionnaires completed by the learners and NS volunteers clearly showed that the "benefits are tangible" (Nunan, 1988, 105). A staggering number of learners agreed that their speaking, listening, and cultural understanding skills had improved regardless of their length of stay in Japan. Moreover, the findings seem to correspond with what the NSs perceived as improvements among the learners, i.e., fluency, listening, sociocultural skills, and initiation in conversation. When CI was carefully integrated into the intermediate course and managed effectively, 10 hours of regular meetings with NSs outside the classroom were not a chore for the learners and the NSs. On the contrary, CI was an enjoyable and worthwhile learning experience for both parties.

Although 10 hours may account for a small part of the overall language learning journey, CI had a great impact on the learners. Without the 10 hours of interaction with NS volunteers outside the classroom, I believe, the learners would not have experienced this great satisfaction and the sense of achievement in communicating in Japanese. After years of hard work in the classroom, the learners had the opportunity to realise how enjoyable and rewarding language learning can be. By moving beyond the classroom and back, CI was an irreplaceable learning experience for these learners. To conclude my paper, I would like to share with you an email from one of my students who testifies to the effect of this project.

I would like to thank you Imura sensei for the hours you have spent organising the community involvement project. I found it to be of great benefit. Not only did I learn quite a lot from Miyauchi san [NS partner], the project also provided some much needed motivation. After six years of textbook learning, for me, Japanese was becoming a little bit repetitive. This programme challenged me to learn more and improve upon what I already knew.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Appendix

$$(No.　)　\underline{\hspace{6cm}}$$

	(　　　　)

Preparation

（Write what you had planned/prepared in advance to this meeting.）
（Write the questions you have prepared to ask to your partner.） ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

After the meeting

General impression about this meeting.
Please tick an area within the scale of 1 to 10, which reflects your impression about this meeting. '1' indicating 'terrible' and '10' 'excellent'.

```
--------------------------------------------------------
1     2     3     4     5     6     7     8     9     10
terrible                                        excellent
```

Please write anything you had experienced and learned from this meeting (e.g. how you performed, what difficulties you had, what you intend to do next based on the performance, strategies you found useful in communication, feeling about communicating in Japanese, and so forth).

On the whole, how would you feel about speaking Japanese with your partner(s).
Please tick an area within the scale of 1 to 10, which reflects your feelings. '1' indicating 'very nervous' and '10' 'very comfortable indeed'.

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--------------------------------------------------------
1     2     3     4     5     6     7     8     9     10
very nervous                          very comfortable indeed
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