



Japan Fest 2023: Cross-college cultural collaboration for Koryo High School

In a collaborative effort across the School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Science, the School of Education and the School of Environment and Life Sciences, three of our colleagues recently delivered Japan Fest 2023. Associate Professor Kiwako Ito, Senior Lecturer Rachel Burke, and Senior Lecturer Andrea Griffin combined their disciplines and knowledge to partner with a selective high school in Japan, giving students at our University the chance to moderate the science projects from the senior students at Koryo High and create an educational discussion forum. All whilst building on the participating students' English language skills.

The answers in this article are a collaboration between:

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Kiwako Ito
Associate Professor



Rachel Burke
Senior Lecturer



Andrea Griffin
Senior Lecturer in Conservation Psychol...

How did the three of you meet?

Upon her return from Japan, Andrea found Kiwa through her friend Dr Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan, (Senior Lecturer in French Studies in the School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Sciences), whom she asked about Japanese language contacts both across Newcastle high schools and internally to our University. Marie-Laure works closely with Kiwa for the Master of Translation Studies.

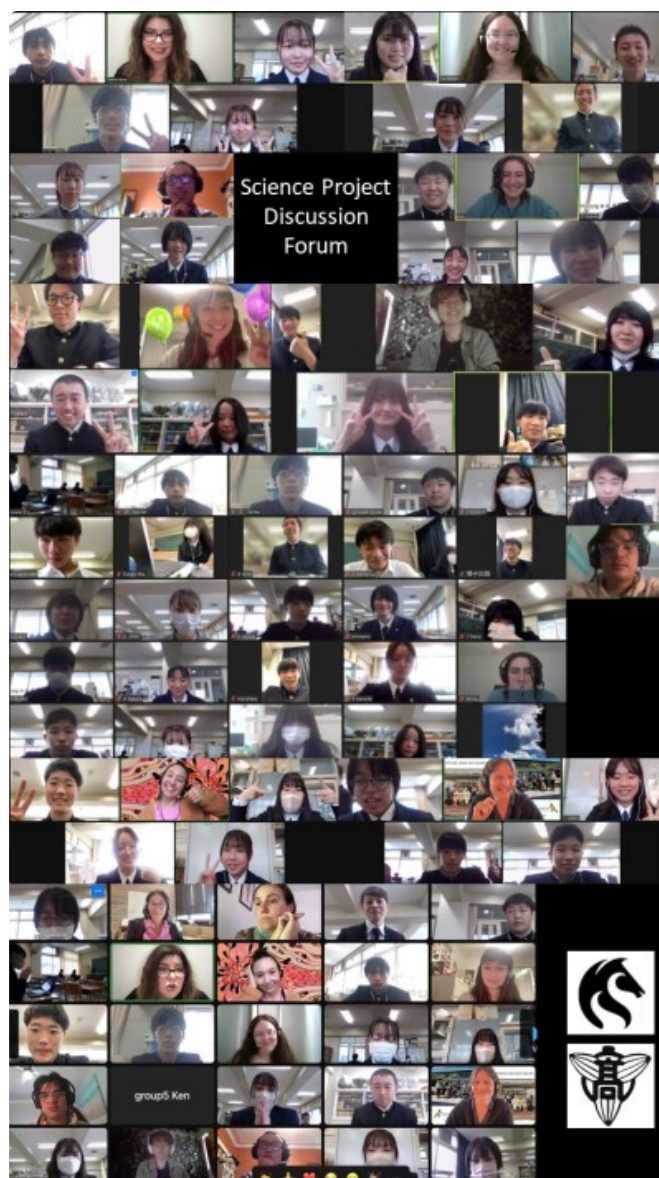
Kiwa then thought that this would be a great learning opportunity for both linguistics majors and modern language majors, and particularly for those who are majoring in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and

thus contacted Rachel Burke in Education who has been collaborating on research and co-advising students with Kiwa and teaching in the second language acquisition field.

What is Japan Fest?

Koryo High School – UON Science Project Discussion Forum provided Koryo High School students with an opportunity to exercise their conversational skills in English while brainstorming their science projects.

It was attended by about 40 high school students (corresponding to year 11) who have been working on a wide range of science projects (e.g., eco-friendly wrapping paper, marsh preservation, biodegradable plastics, simulation of tsunami damage with a model, applying deep learning to predict popularity of pop music, etc.). Eight of our students (six linguistics majors, one Japanese major, and one science major), together with Andrea and Rachel, served as discussion moderators. Kiwa served as the fest navigator.



Collage of participants in Japan Fest 2023

Each group (of three-four students) had one moderator throughout the Forum, which was divided into four 15-min sub-sessions (1) Topic and motivation; (2) Background/literature review; (3) Methodology; and (4) Hypotheses and predictions. Within each group, attendants shared the information about their projects all in English with the help of the group's moderator.

Where did the idea for Japan Fest come from?

When Kiwa first met with a teacher from Koryo High School, she learned that their STEMM students are working on various science projects. While their English is good enough to give practiced presentations, they were not exercising conversational skills to discuss their projects. Kiwa therefore suggested that Koryo and UON co-host the Science Project Discussion Forum, where high school

students are given opportunities to brainstorm their projects in small groups, and UON students serve as discussion moderators.

How did it feel to watch the students present?

Watching the students inspired a strong sense of appreciation of the work they had done and the effort they were making to communicate with us. The students were passionate about their projects and demonstrated a strong commitment to wanting to make a difference to the challenges our environment and society face today. They navigated the challenges of presenting their projects in a foreign language with great concentration and a sense of fun.

How did you organise your student moderators?

Kiwa called for volunteers from her current LING3120 Second Language Acquisition course and from Lab for Applied Language Science. Rachel and Andrea also asked for volunteers from their respective student groups.

Once we had a team of moderators, we had two face-to-face meetings to first get to know each other, learn the purpose of the event, and Zoom-chat with some of the high school students, and to prepare for the moderator task by going through the project summary documents submitted by the high school students. Three schools (HCISS, SELS and EDU) all financially supported the meetings.

At those meetings, we talked about how to use icebreaker questions to get to know them and warm them up for conversations, how to frame the questions for those who are not proficient in English, and how to use gestures to communicate etc.

What is next for all of you?

It would be wonderful to continue building a connection between our students and Japan.

Koryo staff reported that their students were challenged in a positive way and had a great learning experience. They hope to continue collaborating with us in the future.

The student moderators also gained important insights into the challenges and rewards of learning via different languages. The experience provided useful professional preparation for the realities of working in culturally and linguistically rich global environments, whether as teachers, applied linguistics, or

scientists. Moving forward, we hope to expand these opportunities for our students.

The sister wetland exchange agreement between Hunter Wetlands and Kushiro Wetlands is celebrating its 30 years in 2024. This important event is in planning and will involve a Kushiro delegation from Japan visiting our region. Our team will be exploring avenues for teaching and research exchanges for both environmental sciences and linguistic within that celebration. The Australian Government's New Colombo Plan provides an additional avenue to support our university's engagement with Japan.

How important in your opinion is it to have this international and interdisciplinary collaboration?

This event provided a truly unique learning experience for our students, who applied their knowledge and skills to communicate about things outside their comfort zones.

Our students (this time mostly from the language-related disciplines) learned what it is like to navigate a discussion with non-proficient learners of English. They had to be creative to make the discussion engaging and fun, and had to get familiar with a wide range of scientific topics that they would not hear much about while taking courses only in their humanity disciplines. Our students were impressed by the quality of science projects by high school students, and learned how hard it is for them to talk about science in their second language. The event provided the students with the cultural exposure, training for language teaching, and the opportunity to be educated about so many fun science projects .

Student testimonials from being moderators:

From Avery:

What challenges (due to the language and cultural barrier) did you experience?

It was difficult to overcome the formality of the setting. Students were very comfortable talking about their chosen topics, but asking questions that made them think about more tangential things was a bit more difficult. I think I need to work on simplifying my sentence constructions, that would have made communication easier.

What did you learn/enjoy the most?

It was interesting seeing how schooling is set out for these students and how different my own high school science and language learning experiences were! I wish we would have done something like this in high school language classes, applying language skills in different settings, especially with the opportunity to talk to native speakers.

It was interesting seeing what parts of their experiments the students considered most important and therefore were more comfortable talking about most often, versus which parts were not assigned importance and were more difficult to get them to talk about. Group settings are always very interesting, I would be interested to know what sort of class discussions the students had before and after the forum. This was a really cool experience though, from a second language acquisition perspective and also a cross cultural collaborative academia perspective, I would be very interested in being involved in similar projects in the future! Thanks for the opportunity!!

From Richard:

What challenges (due to the language and cultural barrier) did you experience?

The challenges I had during this event certainly would have come from trying to strike the balance between using simplistic and complex English words when trying to convey my ideas to the students; to which they would either consult their fellow students for help or stare at me in confusion. I would also add that there were times where I myself became confused by the words they used when communicating with me, it's like a puzzle piece trying to piece together their words to form a coherent English sentence.

What did you learn/enjoy the most?

During this event, I found myself enjoying the process of getting to know my students at a fundamental level; one of them enjoys Pokémon like me. Using what little Japanese I know was very amusing and surprising to them, and finding out just how competent their level of English was as foreign speakers was really impressive.