

SDGs and emergency online learning spaces: critical dialogue as a way to develop social responsibility in the “new normal”

Abstract: In the months of February and March 2021, the *Virtual “ryuugaku” for real interactions and job-hunting: supporting Covid online teaching of Japanese language oral and written production skills* project was carried out at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice by the research group NoLBrick (No Level Brick). This project was created with the initial intention of making up for the limitations that the Covid 19 pandemic imposed in regard to educational provisions, and to provide students with both an alternative that would allow them to perform the mandatory internship needed to fulfill the university credits and an opportunity to somehow live the experience of an exchange, albeit virtually, with students from Ca’ Foscari and about 30 universities located in Japan.

The students who took part in this project had different degrees of responsibility regardless of their level of Japanese and were divided into 20 groups, each having a different theme of discussion. These themes were all related to SDGs and sought to foster dialogues that stimulate active thinking and therefore, an active way of learning.

During the weekly online meetings I had with the groups of participants I coordinated, I noticed that the discussions always tended to shift towards their relationship with the themes and how the themes affected them, to the point that it became impossible not to think that the outcome of the project would have been different had the themes been different and less “urgent”.

Through the analysis of a diverse pool of data collected during the different phases of the project, this paper aims to describe 1) the impact these themes had on the students in terms of social responsibility and critical awareness, and 2) how the creation of spaces in which dialogic communication is encouraged can play a central role in participants’ growth, leading ideally to the development in some of the participating students of a sense of self-empowerment that can translate into action even outside the classroom.

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1. Introduction

February 2020 was a critical month for Italy: news of the spread of the Covid-19 virus were getting exponentially alarming and the gravity of the situation became increasingly apparent. Although the first national lockdown did not become effective until March 9, 2020, several institutions, including Ca' Foscari University, decided to take preventive measures and temporarily suspend all in-person activities. Both professors and students were forced to adapt to the new situation with little to no notice in the middle of the spring semester and therefore find ways to make face-to-face courses work remotely. Indeed, the core difference between online learning and emergency remote teaching (ERT) is that, contrary to thought-out fully online learning programs, ERT courses aren't originally designed to support online interactions, but rather are a response with a primary objective of ensuring temporary and as-effective-as-possible access to teaching during an emergency (Hodges et al., 2020). This resulted in an initial discrepancy in the ways professors decided to reorganize their courses: some favored asynchronous classes while others used synchronous learning (Patricia Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Starting from September 2020, however, Ca' Foscari unified its system and all classes were held in dual-mode (physical classrooms at 50% of capacity, implementation of a reservation system in order for students who wished to attend classes in presence to book their spot, professors operating both online and offline at the same time), only to go back to strictly online activities from March 15, 2021 to April 7, 2021 during the second national lockdown. It then continued with limited dual-mode classes through the end of the second semester.

The *Virtual "ryuugaku" for real interactions and job-hunting: supporting Covid online teaching of Japanese language oral and written production skills* project (hereinafter referred to as "*Virtual ryuugaku*") was also conceived as a response to the state of emergency in order to provide opportunities where the "new normal" had taken them away: by participating in the project, students had the opportunity to perform the mandatory internship necessary to fulfill their university credits and to partly compensate for the missed experience of an international exchange. Unlike ERT classes, the project was created with the specific intention of building a stable and formative learning space throughout its duration, although it hopes to be a temporary solution while face-to-face experiences are restricted. As a matter of fact, it would be correct to define it as an emergency online learning space, whose design was carefully thought through and not born out of obligation as was the case with regular ERT courses. Moreover, all the students who took part in the project did so by choice, as it was not mandatory.

1.1 Project outline

The *Virtual ryuugaku* project was funded by The Japan Foundation, and it was born from an idea of the Project Manager Prof. Marcella M. Mariotti who also organized the project while being assisted by one Project Coordinator and three Project Junior

Coordinators. The project was held entirely online over two months, from February to March 2021, and counted a total of 118 participants who ranged from first year bachelor students to second year master students. Out of the 118 participants, 84 were studying Japanese language at Ca' Foscari University and 34 were students with various academic backgrounds from 18 different universities located in Japan. The participants were divided into 20 groups, each having a different theme of discussion related to a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) that was to be developed throughout the duration of the project through different activities: weekly participation in Japanese language free conversation classes, weekly publication of a blog post by each group, blog-related activities such as reading and commenting others' blog posts, weekly meetings on Zoom with one own's group and with the assigned coordinator, background activities such as research of articles and vocabulary in preparation of their weekly micro-theme, and daily exchange of instant messages on a chat platform of choice (Slack). Almost all activities —except for blog posts that could be written in English— were to be carried out in Japanese. During Zoom meetings the students were free to choose the language they deemed the most practical. The groups were formed by 3 to 5 Ca' Foscari students from different year groups and 1 to 2 students from Japan, following the No Level idea¹ that meaningful conversations can be held independently from one's language skills. Moreover, the participants all had different degrees of responsibility (責任者 group supervisor, 副責任者 group vice-supervisor), group member) regardless of their level of Japanese. Whereas the project coordinators were in constant and direct contact with the students-participants, the teachers (such as the Project Manager and the linguistic expert collaborators who normally hold the free conversation classes) had a supportive, background role (see Figure 1).

1.2 Research questions and framework

As one of the project's Junior Coordinators, I supervised 7 groups. Though all groups were autonomous and self-managed, my task was to monitor their activities. To receive more effective feedback, I would meet over Zoom with the supervisors and vice-supervisors of the groups I coordinated once a week and ask them about their weeks: the tone of the meetings was informal enough for them to frankly discuss any difficulties and doubts they encountered. Interestingly, I noticed that the discussions would always drift towards the assigned themes, and in particular towards the relationship they had with them and the way the themes affected them and their

¹ The No Level framework is part of the No-Level Brick Language Education for All (NoLBrick) research project developed by Prof. Marcella M. Mariotti in the field of Japanese language education. NoLBrick works towards the implementation of transformative language educational practices, the de-standardization of language teaching, and the relevance of *glocal* e-Learning Ai systems, ultimately aiming at the development of active citizenship and social cohesion.

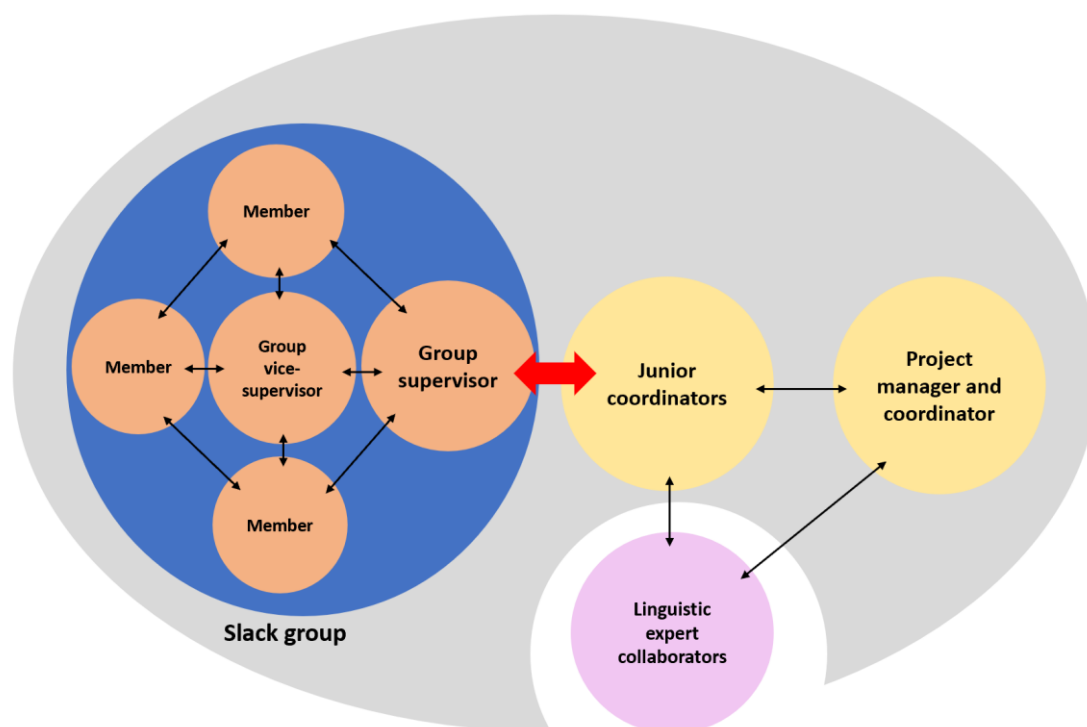


Figure 1. Scheme of communicational relationships within the project

work. It is important to underline that when the students applied for the project, they were asked to indicate the topics they would like to talk about and select from a pool of themes (that were very similar to the final ones, whose relation to the SDGs was clearly specified) those they were interested in. They were then assigned to a specific group that did not always strictly correspond to their expressed preferences, resulting in some students having to treat a theme they had no previous interest in. The way this aspect influenced the students' work will be explored in the next sections.

Specifically, the 18 themes were:

1. Covid-19
2. 働き方 (working styles)
3. 環境問題 (environmental issues)
4. 日本語教育 (Japanese language teaching education)
5. 福祉 (welfare)
6. 教育制度 (educational systems)
7. 飢餓対策 (zero hunger)

8. 観光 (tourism)
9. 就職について (regarding job employment)
10. 文化ステレオタイプ (cultural stereotypes)
11. 言語教育 (language teaching education)
12. 難民問題 (immigration)
13. 海洋資源 (marine resources)
14. ジェンダー (gender)
15. 貧困対策 (no poverty)
16. 伝統行事 (traditional events)
17. 生涯学習 (lifelong learning)
18. 環境保護 (tourism)

Given the high number of students who expressed an interest in these topics, both 日本語教育 (Japanese language teaching education) and 言語教育 (language teaching education) were assigned to two groups each. All themes sought to encourage dialogues to stimulate critical thinking and therefore an active way of learning, where active learning implies activities in which the students not only engage in higher-order thinking tasks (discussion, analysis, evaluation, solving), but also reflect on what they are doing (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). It is precisely this aspect that led to my research questions: *In what ways and how much did these themes have an impact on the students' sense of social responsibility and critical awareness? And how much does the creation of spaces in which dialogic communication is encouraged influence the growth of the learner? Where the awareness of the self is a product of a continuous negotiation that happens through social interaction with others (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009), the critical element can be brought into the equation by means of dialogue. Indeed, if the goal of higher education is to create individuals who "can and will change the world" (Mariotti, 2020, p.442), be "positive forces" (Colby, 2003, p.7) and spokespersons of democratic knowledge (hooks, 1994; Hall & Tandon 2021), learners not only have to become aware of their role both as agents and recipients of power as members of a community, but they must do so while developing a personal and proactive sense of connection with the social problems they analyze (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009). Therefore, creating dialogic spaces by assigning engaging and contemporary themes to the students to discuss with other learners has a double objective: fostering critical thinking and ideally, cultivating their sense of social responsibility.*

No one can force another person to develop a sense of social responsibility, nor, as Tella & Mononen-Altonen (1998) explain, can a cognitive change (awareness) be necessarily expected to lead to practical change, especially in a short period of time. What is crucial, though, is the possibility of change itself that dialogue implies: during proactive and intentional interactions with others, connections are formed, and so is the learners' awareness of their roles as members of a larger social fabric (Colby et al., 2003). Collaborative learning is one of the central components when it comes to critical pedagogy and according to the literature on community-based learning, social engagement with others is an effective way to increase the possibility for the learner to develop their sense of social responsibility (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace: 79-80).

In the *Virtual Ryuugaku* project, critical language teaching is an important component as well, as language also can be considered as social practice, meaning that through language, it is possible to "reflect on and transform social relations" (Rocha Pessoa & De Urzêda Freitas, 2012). As we will see in the next sections of this paper, having students discuss critical themes in Japanese made them reflect on what they were saying and on how they were expressing their opinions, since they were motivated to make others understand their thoughts and ideas as much as they were interested in understanding those of other students. This generated dialogue that ideally leads to the to the creation of new meanings, an outcome that was in fact observed in some cases. In this sense, language has a major role in the possible development of a learner's sense of self-empowerment, where empowerment is considered as awareness of one's own possibility and therefore agency in creating change.

During a period in which face-to-face interactions are extremely limited, creating connections becomes fundamental not only to engage and stimulate students but also to help them keep in touch with reality. Indeed, technology can be an added value by using it to share, work and cooperate in a group, hence reinforcing a sense of community and creating meaning (Ferri et al., 2020). As reported by Hall and Tandon in *Socially Responsible Higher Education* (2021), examples of engaged pedagogy have been numerous and are on the rise globally, but little to no literature is found regarding critical language teaching education in relation to emergency remote teaching contexts.

1.3 Methodology

In this research I favored a qualitative approach based on a thematic analysis of the students' responses to various open-ended and closed-ended questions posed in three anonymous questionnaires, paired with a quantitative approach applied in a comparative way by observing the variations in the numbers of elements present in answers to various same questions submitted at different times. Specifically, I decided to focus my analysis on the responses given by the 84 Ca' Foscari students who actively participated in the project, and not include those of the various Ca' Foscari students

who participated in the weekly Japanese free conversation classes included in their courses alone, and those of the 34 students from Japan. The reasons why I decided to use this approach was to achieve consistency and coherence of the results and to avoid the risk of categorization. The first two questionnaires, which were created and written by the Project Coordinators team, had an identical structure and contained the same questions (except for some variations that underlined the fact that the second questionnaire had to be answered aware of the fact that it was handed out one month after the mid-project general meeting) but were distributed at different stages of the project: one halfway through (beginning of March) and the other at the end (beginning of April). I then created a third survey modeled on the responses to the first two questionnaires with the expectations and needs of my research in mind, resulting in questions that had primarily focused on the themes of the project and the way the students responded to and perceived them. My questionnaire was distributed during the first week of August 2021, four months after the end of the project. All three surveys were online and were sent by email to all participants.

2. Data Analysis

Out of the 84 participants from Ca' Foscari, 80 (95%) responded to the first questionnaire and 69 (82%) to the second one, but only 22 students responded to the third one, sent out in August, meaning only the 27.5% of the participants who took part in the first survey filled it out. It should be noted however that the last questionnaire was sent during the summer vacation period. Moreover, whereas students were motivated to fill out the first two surveys because they had to complete their internship, there was no external pressure to do so for the third. The fact that only 17.6% of the initial participants responded to the August questionnaire can be considered an important data itself: given that the students were under no obligation to respond to the August questionnaire, it is likely that those who did were interested in sharing their opinion and/or that the project left an impression on the students that made them want to dedicate some time to it even outside of their “academic duties”.

2.1 Students and critical themes

The first section of the August questionnaire consisted of an evaluation of all 18 themes based on three different criteria: degree of interest in the theme, perceived degree of difficulty of the theme, and degree of involvement in the theme. To explore the different levels of interest the students felt towards the theme, a distinction was made between ‘interest’ and ‘involvement’.

I define ‘interest’ here as a curiosity that exists in the students pre-dialogue which is characterized by a more passive approach to issues; ‘involvement’, instead, is defined as an active approach to issues and this ideally happens through dialogue and thus confrontation. Every aspect had to be evaluated on a scale from one to four,

where one stood for extremely low, two for quite low, three for quite high and four for extremely high. There was no neutral option because I wanted the students to express a stance, even if only a mild one. I also decided to insert the word 'perception' in the title of this questionnaire so that the students would be more aware of what they were being asked. It is also important to keep in mind that all those who took part in the August survey had to evaluate all the themes, regardless of the group they belonged to or themes they discussed during the project, meaning that the results indicate a more general perception of them and are not exclusively based on firsthand interactions.

To make the results easier to read when represented in tables such as table 1 and table 2, I decided to pair the extremely low with the quite low parameters and the extremely high with the quite high parameters and then compare the 'low' and 'high' blocks. Students generally tended to select the moderate options, but there were a few themes on which they expressed a stronger stance: 文化ステレオタイプ (cultural stereotypes) is the theme that had the highest degree of involvement and interest, with more than half of the "positive" answers being in the 'extremely' range. Similar observations can be made for the ジェンダー (gender) theme for both the 'interest' and 'involvement' categories, whilst for 伝統行事 (traditional events), 12 out of 19 students expressed an "extremely" high level of interest in the theme and only 7 out of 19 did the same with the level of involvement. Moreover, students were more likely to select stronger options for the 'interest' and 'involvement' parameters if their perception was "positive" while they expressed stronger "negative" opinions less often. The opposite was seen for the 'perceived difficulty' parameter, where students had no problems expressing stronger "negative" stances. Indeed, the themes that were perceived as more difficult had a very high percentage of 'extremely high' answers: for example, 海洋資源 (marine resources) was perceived as a difficult theme by 22 students out of 22 and of those students, 12 selected the 'extremely high' option. As for 難民問題 (immigration), out of 21 students who deemed the theme difficult, 13 chose the 'extremely high' option.

When comparing the 'interest' aspect with the 'involvement' aspect of each theme, no discrepancies were found, with the expressed degree of interest usually slightly higher than the degree of involvement. There were three themes that presented an inverted tendency (level of involvement higher than the level of interest): Covid-19, 働き方 (working styles) and 教育制度 (educational systems), with Covid-19 presenting a slightly bigger interval (3 persons).

To add to this analysis, I then decided to compare the degree of perceived difficulty of a theme with the degree of involvement respondents felt to see if they were directly or indirectly proportional. An impressive finding was that a higher degree of perceived difficulty did not always correspond to a lower degree of involvement, depending

INTEREST VS. INVOLVEMENT

■ LOW ■ HIGH

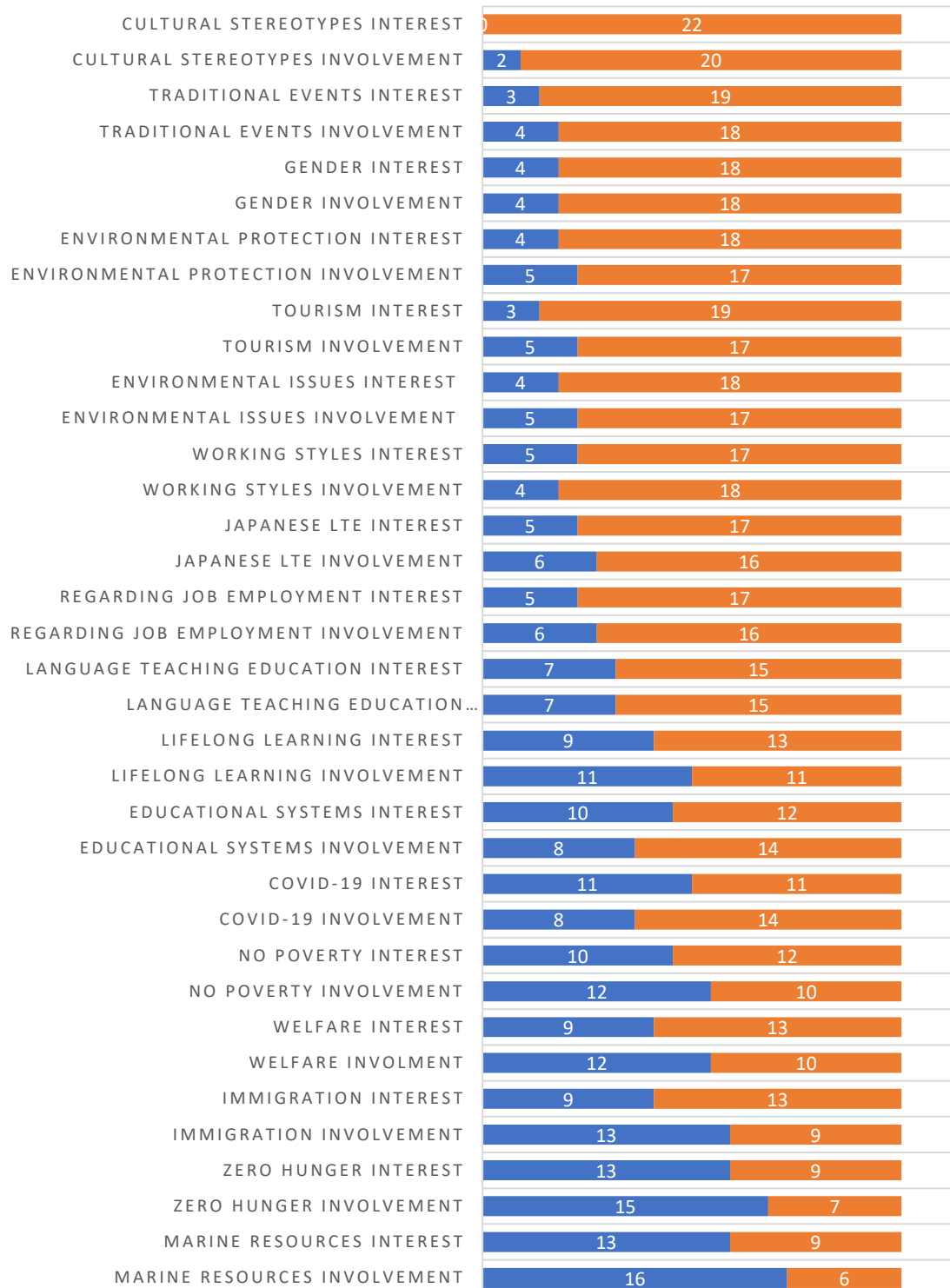


Table 1. Comparison between the degree of interest and the degree of involvement

instead on the theme. For example, in table 2 we can see how for 環境保護 (environmental protection) 21 students out of 22 selected a high level of perceived difficulty of the theme, with more than half of the answers being 'extremely high'. But even so, it is one of the themes that presented the highest levels of involvement (17 out of 22, of which 9 selected the 'extremely high' option). The same cannot be said of 海洋資源 (marine resources), that ranked the lowest both in the 'interest' and 'involved' parameters (see table 1): all participants expressed a high level of perceived difficulty towards the theme, with 12 students selecting the 'extremely high' option.

But what are the elements that made students perceive a theme as difficult? According to the responses, 63.6% of participants in the August questionnaire chose "perception of a theme as 'complex', 'heavy' and therefore not 'fun'" thus resulting in the most selected option. The second most selected option, with 54.5%, was "not believing to be able to talk about it in an interesting or relevant way in Japanese", compared to the 22.7% that selected the similar but language-neutral option. The language factor seems to have had a significant impact on the perception of the degree of difficulty of a theme: when directly asked to evaluate on a scale to 1 to 5 (1 being 'not at all' and 5 being 'in a decisive way') how much they thought the use of Japanese language in the project influenced their perception of the degree of difficulty of a theme, 22.7% selected 5, 54.5% selected 4, 13.6% selected 3 and the remaining 9.1% selected 2. In particular, students seemed to share the thought that, more than the language itself, what generated an element of difficulty was the necessity to prepare and research the vocabulary for those themes that were generally perceived as "too specific" or "too technical", resulting in less fluid conversations and the development of a sense of frustration.

"Because of the complexity of certain themes, it is very hard to express one's own opinion without using appropriate terms. Many themes (especially those related to contemporary social problems) need to be discussed with specific terms that a student might not know, making it difficult to participate actively in a discussion" (anonymous student, August 2021)

"According to my experience, following the conversation was not easy because of the difficult vocabulary and so expressing one's own opinion became complicated" (anonymous student, August 2021)

Indeed, even though the language factor significantly influenced the perception of the difficulty of a theme for the majority of those who responded to the August questionnaire, it didn't have as much of an impact on the way the students shaped their relationship with it throughout the project, with only the 27.3% of the respondents saying that it did.

"[...] despite the linguistic difficulties, I tried to treat the theme the same way I would have in my native language. Obviously linguistic limitations can weight on the research and contents processing phases" (anonymous student, August 2021)

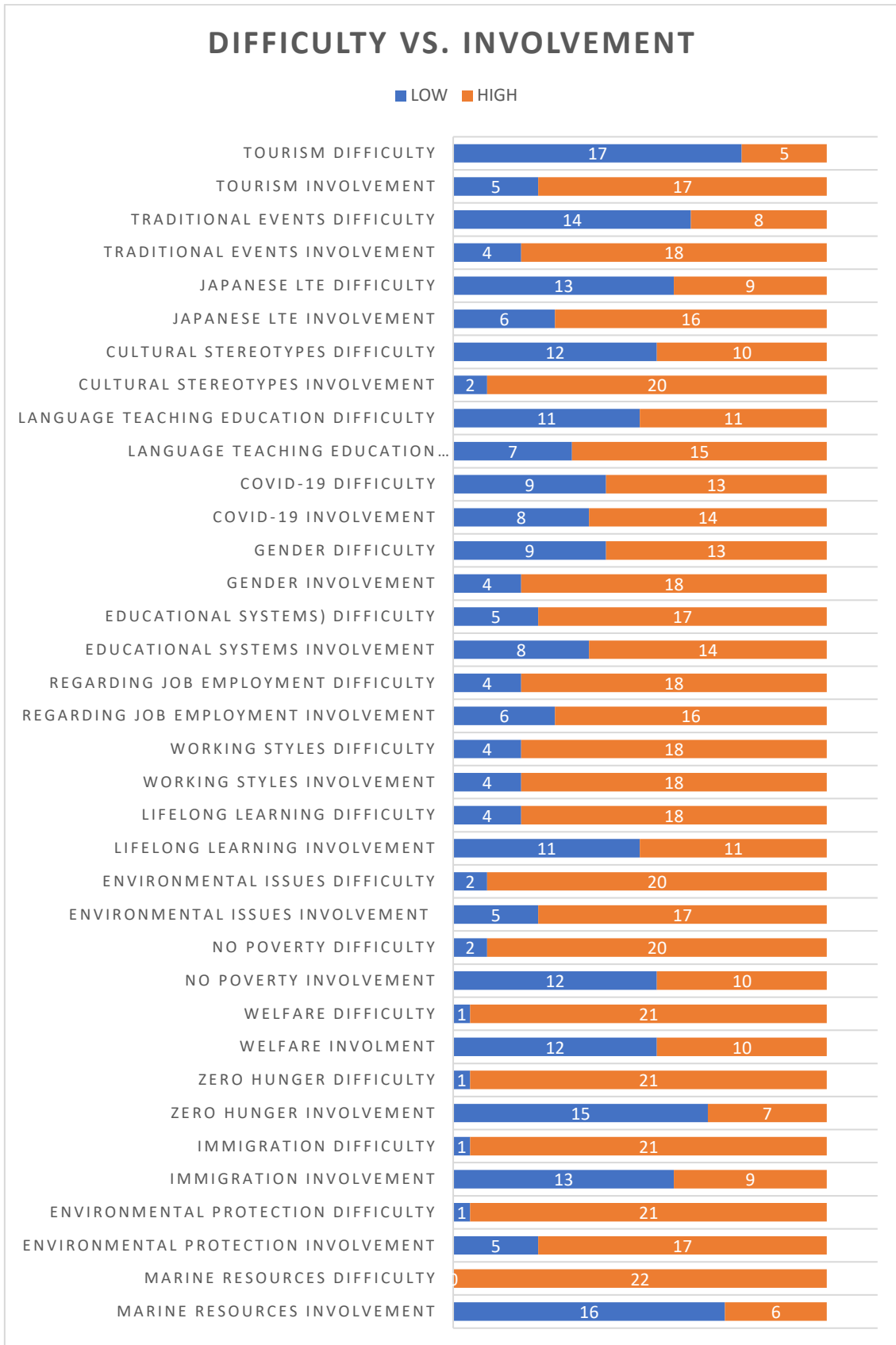


Table 2. Comparison between the degree of perceived difficulty and the degree of involvement

"[...] if the project would have been carried out in English I would have had more time to dedicate to the actual theme and not spending it on researching terms, but a lower level of linguistic difficulty still wouldn't have made me feel closer to the theme" (anonymous student, August 2021)

Moreover, when asked what motivated them to participate in the project, a large majority (87.5% of 80 respondents) answered that it was the possibility to exercise their written and oral Japanese language skills, with the 94.2% of the 69 students who took part in the first questionnaire (April) confirming the same motivation when asked what made them continue. The students were driven by the linguistic challenges derived from having to discuss sensitive themes, but at the same time, most of them felt a sense of frustration caused by not always being able to completely convey their thoughts on the matter.

It is interesting to see that almost half of the proposed solutions to improve the project concerned the themes. The suggestions received in the April questionnaire can be divided into three general categories: periodical theme rotation, allowing the participants to choose the theme they are the most interested in (so not only giving them the possibility to express preferences), and widening the range of themes one can choose from by including "simpler and more stimulating (or "fun") themes". Indeed, when looking at the other selected options in response to the question about what influenced the perception of the level of difficulty of a theme, almost half of the respondents to the August questionnaire found the lack of interest for and the low involvement felt in a theme to have had a considerable impact on it.

"Even if a theme is difficult, it doesn't mean that a person, by carefully informing themselves about it, cannot create their own opinion. One can still have an opinion about it, but the levels of interest and involvement will be low if not non-existent" (anonymous student, August 2021)

In the next sections we will see that intra-group dynamics significantly influenced the students' perception and approach to the themes as well.

2.2 Students and motivational factors

So, what generated students' interest in the students instead? What made them feel more involved despite the difficulty of a theme? In the students' answers to the March and April questionnaire regarding the way they approached and interacted with the themes all throughout the project, I was able to identify four non-excluding categories of elements that describe their relationship with them. The first one consists of mentions of previous knowledge and interest in a theme, and of direct personal experiences with it ("*Environmental protection is a topic I already held close to my heart, so I had the chance to learn about it over the years*", anonymous student March 2021; "*We have always tried to propose topics by taking inspiration from our personal experiences, so as to make everyone more involved*", anonymous student, March 2021. In the second category, I recognized mentions of uncritical factual

knowledge approaches (*“Not having a lot of familiarity with the theme, being it quite vast, my exploration of it is for now based on superficial factual knowledge”*, anonymous student, March 2021; *“I shared links of videos and articles in the group channel”*, anonymous student, April 2021); the third category presents mentions of dialogic and critical approaches to the themes, and all the elements that suggested an active way of interacting with the other members of the group (*“We discussed about it together”*, anonymous student, April 2021; *“The exchange of opinions allows us to find points with which we can agree or disagree, leading then to other points of discussion”*, anonymous student, March 2021); and in the last category, mentions of practical solutions, both from a negative point of view (*“I didn’t expressed real solutions because the topics are extremely sensitive and difficult”*, anonymous student, April 2021; *“I never proposed practical solutions”*, anonymous student, April 2021) and a positive point of view (*“[...] we tried to propose solutions that could make this theme more known and understood by contemporary society”*, anonymous student, March 2021; *“We explored it in a practical way, looking for aspects of the topic that also affect everyday life and by proposing concrete solutions”*, anonymous student, April 2021).

The aforementioned elements (1. previous knowledge and interest, 2. uncritical factual knowledge, 3. mentions of dialogic and critical approaches, 4. mentions of practical solutions) are present in the responses in varying amounts, with mentions of dialogic and critical approaches to the themes being the most widespread (it was present in the 83.75% of responses of the March questionnaire and in the 59.4% of the April one), followed in descending order by uncritical and factual knowledge approaches (66.25% and 53.6% of the March and April questionnaire, respectively), mentions of practical solutions (41.2% and 42%) and mentions of previous knowledge and interest (11.25% and 11.6%). Interaction and dialogue with the other are therefore fundamental elements in the development of the students' relationship with the subjects, and a key step in the growth of levels of interest and involvement. In some cases, this growth has turned into an active awareness, eventually also leading to group conversations about practical solutions.

“I have shaken off the veil of prejudice and I have learnt to understand who’s on the other side. Moreover, I have interacted with people who not always have my same way of looking at things, so it was interesting to get to know their dynamics” (anonymous student, April 2021)

“I believe that the objective of becoming aware of the importance of the topic has been achieved and I think that some members will continue the reflection started in the group and will be able to find solutions for an improvement of language education in the future” (anonymous student, April 2021)

“I believe that, especially towards the end, we all reached a great awareness of the themes, especially those related to current affairs, succeeding in getting to the heart of the problem. [...] research and discussion were fundamental in order to understand the root of the issue and propose solutions to defeat but also prevent them” (anonymous student, April 2021)

“My group’s theme helped me become more aware of what surrounds me. I expressed my opinions and I have confronted them with those of my colleagues and I realized that a lot of the things I take for granted aren’t so” (anonymous student, April 2021)

Moreover, there is a tendency in the students whose relationship with the theme developed to the point of active awareness, to initially approach the theme from an a-critical point of view, sometimes mixing factual knowledge (including linguistic aspects such as specific vocabulary research) with personal experiences, but to then switch to an active type of research and confrontation with the members of the group. This collaborative learning approach, together with participative discussions, brought the group members together and helped create a space in which the students felt safe to express themselves despite linguistic challenges and personal characteristics. It also helped them develop soft skills such as organizational and communication competencies. When asked which aspects of the project had been the most valuable to them, there was a significant raise in the number of mentions of elements related to personal improvement of soft skills and self-esteem/confidence in the answers of the April questionnaire when compared to the March questionnaire, with the 26.5% in March almost doubling to 50.7% in April.

“[...] creating bonds with my group allowed us to always trust each other and help each other during moments of difficulty without any judgement” (anonymous student, April 2021)

“Undoubtedly, the free conversations classes and zoom meetings with group members were vital to one’s personal improvement and that of collective work. They provided new lifeblood to ideas and thoughts, as well as stimuli for learning Japanese” (anonymous student, April 2021)

“Working in a group has given me the opportunity to gain more courage to speak and express my opinions more freely” (anonymous student, April 2021)

“[...] the most important part was the interaction to push not only myself but also those who like me are always a little afraid to leave their comfort zone, especially in situations where you have to necessarily speak in a foreign language (without judgment of course things were much easier), but on a human level it gave me a lot” (anonymous student, April 2021)

Most of the answers (81.25% in the March questionnaire and 71.25% in the April questionnaire) also presented elements related to linguistic aspects (*“being able to confront myself with people who had higher level of Japanese since they helped me learn new terms and drove me to speak Japanese even about difficult themes”* a.s., March 2021), while 42.4% of answers in the March questionnaire contained elements regarding dialogic communication beyond the linguistic aspects, and changes in levels of awareness (*“[...] having to pay attention to how you express your opinion during free conversation classes, being careful using the right sensitivity when talking about certain topics (as religions, racism, bullying and so on”* a.s., March 2021) . This decreased to 30.4% of answers in April.

3. Limitations

Given that the number of students who responded to the August questionnaire was significantly lower than the number of respondents of the first two surveys, any raw data comparison between them is not as accurate as it would have been if the numbers were more similar. Moreover, since the questionnaires were anonymous, it was not possible to identify case studies that would have enriched the data analysis. Qualitative interviews with a few selected participants will be carried out in the future.

4. The fun factor

In the March questionnaire the students were presented with multiple options at the question “why did you choose to participate to the project”, such as “I wanted to practice my Japanese oral and written skills”, “I couldn’t find an internship”, “I wanted to make new friends”, “I wanted to meet people from Japan” as well as a free text option. No options related to the themes or to the SDGs were given, but the “I became passionate about the themes” and “I became passionate about the new no-level approach to foreign language” answers were then added to the same question in the April questionnaire. More than 50% of the participants expressed an interest in their own theme that was strong enough to make them want to continue to actively take part in the Virtual Ryuugaku project. Whether this interest can be defined as involvement is not immediately clear, but what was very important and significant in determining the degree of involvement is what I like to call the “fun” factor. Indeed, when observing the responses of the students who lamented the heaviness or complexity of a theme, “fun” was the word that was almost always used in contrast. As intended here, the “fun” factor doesn’t only indicate something that is previously (pre-dialogue) perceived as light and easy, thus related to a passive type of interest, but also and especially indicates something stimulating and positively challenging, and made so through dialogic interactions with others. Moreover, based on the data analysis, we can see how dialogue and constant interaction with the other group members played an important part in determining the relationship the students had with the themes. It is possible that different group dynamics influenced the levels of involvement and interest, especially for those themes that were perceived as particularly difficult. As a matter of fact, in the groups where group members felt safe and therefore free to talk, operate and interact, and those where positive dialogic learning environments and communities were formed, the development of both a sense of critical awareness and of social responsibility in the students was clearer.

5. Comments and conclusions

Although the percentage of students that said in the August questionnaire that they were pursuing the concrete proposals made in previous months is minimal (only 13.6% are pursuing proposals, of which 9% through social media, compared to the

20.3% in the April questionnaire), in 21 out of 22 responses to the question “what’s something of the theme of the group you belonged to that you still carry with you?” there are elements that indicate a development of a sense of awareness regarding their theme, or attempts to apply this awareness to their way of living and relating to the world beyond the classroom and academic spaces.

Dialogue, as an intentional and conscious action, implies questioning and thinking and therefore a process of realization of what’s inside of us and, consequently, of what’s outside, from our interlocutors to the context we interact with and exist in (Mariotti, 2020). One could argue the naivety of the idea of the possibility to change social structures and inequalities through dialogue, but when knowledge is shared, we redistribute power as well, hence enhancing the potential for social change (Hawkins & Norton, 2009).

The development and establishment of social responsibility is not something that occurs over a short period of time (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009) so we cannot affirm that all those who took part in this project developed a sense of social responsibility, awareness, and critical thinking. Moreover, not for all of those who did, the growth happened in the same way and followed the same patterns. But the data still show that the Virtual Ryuugaku project offered the possibility of growth, considering it did so in a time when social interactions were very limited. Perhaps, if the project were to be repeated in a situation where students could meet in physical spaces as well as in digital ones, the results would be different or more evident. Indeed, to analyze the extent of the impact face-to-face interactions have on the development of both a sense of social responsibility and awareness in the students when compared to the same project carried out exclusively online and in an emergency situation will be one of my points of focus during the second edition of the Virtual Ryuugaku project (“Virtual ryuugaku for real interactions: collaborative empowerment and SDGs”) that will start in October 2021.

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