

Working in Japanese Where You are Right Now: Internship Program at Ca' Foscari University as a Case Study

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1. Introduction

This study examines an on-campus internship program during the pandemic (from February to March 2021) as a Japanese language education project at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. Despite the unexpected pandemic, many universities all over the world have been coping with the urgent necessity for continuing education during the pandemic (UNESCO 2020) mainly by adopting new online technologies as part of daily educational activities (Rapanta et al 2020). Ca' Foscari University also managed to continue offering lessons online; however, the majority of the students were forced to cancel their plan to leave for Japan to study or participate in an internship program. The "Virtual ryuugaku" (ryugaku: study abroad in Japanese) for real interactions and job-hunting: supporting Covid online teaching of Japanese language oral and written production skills", which received financial support from the Japan Foundation was conducted for students majoring in Japanese to compensate for the lost opportunities during the pandemic. The project contained two sub-projects, and this study focuses on one of them, the "Virtual Business Project". The educational purpose of the Project was to create experiential learning (Kolb 1984), which is learning experience outside the classroom of Japanese language courses. As the name of the project indicates, the "Virtual Business Project" was designed to have a real working setting to enable the students to have job experience using Japanese even though they worked online in Italy. The expected achievement for the ten participants of the Project was to plan and create online learning materials to help learners of Japanese, especially for business purposes.

The Project situated learning in a horizontal relationship among the students as an opposite educational approach to learning in a vertical structure between teachers who teach and students who are taught (Freire 2000), which is more conventional in

university education. During the Project, all the participants had their own responsibility as a member of a small “company”, and they managed the Project by themselves. The two teachers, the author and professor Mariotti (the Director of the entire Project), designed and supervised the Project, leaving autonomy of choice to participants as an opportunity to empower them in responsible decision making. Besides, we decided not to judge or assess the students by their Japanese language proficiency during the Project, but the participants had to clarify reasons for every choice they made. We clearly communicated our expectations to the intern students: to complete high quality materials adopting their own ideas about what materials would be useful both to learners and to teachers with evidence of the necessity or usefulness (To do so, the participants chose to conduct interviews and surveys for both learners and teachers). In sum, the Project aimed to create a place for learning in a horizontal relationship among the participants, but not in a vertical relationship.

The Project is one of several attempts to embody the philosophy of the No-level-brick research project at Ca’ Foscari University. The NolBrick research project was conceived by Mariotti as an attempt to empower the students through "education which concerns not increasing learners’ language proficiency-levels but encouraging learners and teachers to co-engage with critical thinking using the FL" (Mariotti 2020a). So the philosophy underpinning the Virtual Business Project was to raise awareness of collaboration with others using Japanese (i.e., it is not only important to have personal skills such as Japanese language proficiency, but also to have other skills, especially to cooperate with others in order to achieve the project’s goals).

This study attempts to answer how the Project, which aimed to promote learning in the horizontal relationships with interactions among members, changed the participants' self-awareness of their skills and abilities before and after the Project. In order to find out about student's experiences of their internships (Hora, Parrott, and Pa 2020), myself and Mariotti asked the participants to self-assess their experience in the Project. In the assessment, the participants answered five open questions that included: Q1. Write the reason for your participation in the Project; Q3. What did you gain through the Project?; Q4. How do you benefit from the experience that you gained from

the Project? In the self-assessment, all participants evaluated that they had successfully improved interpersonal skills such as teamwork and leadership through the Project. The results suggest that by realizing experiential learning in a horizontal relationship, Japanese language education can give the students a real space to work with others, affecting participants' self-confidence in interpersonal skills. This study concludes with the proposal that experiential learning is an essential approach to transform university from a place to pass on *knowledge* to a place to empower students to collaborate with others using Japanese beyond the classroom.

2. Literature review

2.1 Experiential learning in European higher education

Our literature review begins by examining the trend of internship or work-based learning in higher education institutions in Europe. As the name indicates, internship is an example of experiential learning (Kolb 1984), where students learn through experience. This experiential learning can be positioned opposite to passive learning where students learn by sitting and listening to a teacher's lecture in the classroom. In Europe, the initial emphasis on vocational experience was a tool to overcome chronic high unemployment rates among young people. This trend seems to be further enhanced by the business world that criticizes university education for failing to provide their graduates with demanded skills for employment. OECD (2017), for example, pointed out "a large disconnection between the education system and the world of work" (148) in Italy. To respond to the demands from the business world, the European Commission set the goal to increase "work-based learning including quality traineeships, apprenticeships and dual learning models to help the transition from learning to work" (EUR-Lex. 2012). The main reason for the foundation of the European Higher Education Area (an attempt by 49 member countries and European Commission to establish shared and compatible standards of university education in the Bologna Process) was also to increase the employability of graduates in the member countries (European Higher Education Area 1999). Hora, Parrott and Pa (2020) reported the emerging trend in European and American universities to require students to complete a

mandatory internship. Internship experience is also part of degrees offered by the department of Asia and African Studies at Ca' Foscari University. The students are required to complete internship experience in order to graduate (i.e. 75 hours of internship for B.A. students and 150 hours of experience for M.A. students), and therefore, Mariotti (Project director, as well as internships Department delegate) decided to provide a concrete and immediate response to the cancellation of internship opportunities during the pandemic.

Improvement of graduates' employability and soft skills is one of the significant objectives of experiential learning in European higher education institutions, but the question is what these skills mean and how university education can foster employability and soft skills. Soft skills, which are also called generic skills (D'Amato 2019), and employability do not necessarily mean professional and technical knowledge and skills. The European Higher Education Area, for instance, defines employability as the potential to discover a job that fits oneself as well as meeting social needs and expectations throughout a lifetime (European Higher Education Area n.d.). According to the definitions in previous studies, soft skills or general skills are the most demanded skills in the labor market such as critical thinking and coordination with others (IHF Europe 2021); Working experience (OECD 2017); Interpersonal interactions (Andreas 2018). Taken together, employability and soft skills seem to refer to the ability to use one's own skills and knowledge by reflecting on what others need in society. However, the lack of soft skills in graduates has often been pointed out in Europe and the US (World Economic Forum 2016; OECD 2017; Hora, Parrott, and Pa 2020). The European Higher Education Area (2016) also pointed out that "Whereas higher education institutions tend to equip their graduates with the necessary subject-specific and methodological knowledge, generic skills are not always included in the curricula as a matter of course". The point is that, as both public institutions and private sectors have indicated, university education does not offer enough opportunities to improve soft skills, especially the skills to work with others, even though these skills are highly valued to work successfully with others.

2.2 Interpersonal skills from the perspective of Critical and Transformative Pedagogy

Based on the critical opinion by the European Higher Education Area (2016), this section further examines university education that prioritizes "equipping" the learners with *knowledge*. Regarding knowledge-intensive learning, critical and transformative pedagogy already posed questions against it. Freire (2000) conceptualized the banking concept of education in which teachers take controls of knowledge and try to "transfer" the knowledge to the students, so that the students are equipped with the knowledge; on the other hand, Freire (2000) said that problem-solving education can liberate the learners from the existing value system in the fixed structure where "the teachers know everything and the students know nothing" (73). The difference between critical and transformative pedagogy and the banking concept of education lies in the relationship between learners and teachers that can represent the existing value system. Critical and transformative pedagogy suggests that learners should be fostered to have critical attitudes toward the existing value system and transform it. As Freire (2000) addressed, to gain critical awareness of the society, students need to stop being passive in their learning (e.g., listening obediently to the teachers and accept the transmitted knowledge). Instead, they need to find their own words through dialogue with others. Sato (2014) claims that, to start dialogues among students and between students and teachers, teachers should create spaces to make dialogue happen by stopping teaching. In this respect, critical and transformative pedagogy does not support both learning alone or learning in a vertical relationship because both lack interactions that relate learners to others. Supporting Freire's philosophy, Cummings (2000) explains that "the collaborative creation of power, results from classroom interactions that enable students to relate curriculum content to their individual and collective experience and to analyze broader social issues to their lives" (246). Kubota (1996) also explains that critical awareness through dialogue is necessary because the awareness can empower each individual to expand their own possibilities in their future rather than accepting the way of living dictated by social values. Overall,

interactions among students in a horizontal relationship can be a key learning experience to empower students to be prepared for participation in society.

Previous studies and practice of foreign language education also have raised questions relating to the teaching approach of transferring knowledge and measuring achievement with standardized tests, suggesting interactions among learners in learning as an alternative approach. For example, the CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), perceives learners of foreign language as "social agents" (Council of Europe 2020, 21) who can actively co-construct meaning in foreign language through interaction with others (Council of Europe 2020). The CEFR denies a teaching approach that emphasizes inputting knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar into the learners, aiming to enable learners to start "native-like" communication (Byram 2008). So the concept of "social agent" in the CFER seems to be consistent with the critical view of the European Higher Education Area of conventional university education to "equip" students with knowledge while downplaying fostering soft skills.

Overall, learning in interactions might be a key concept in the shift from knowledge-transferring education to education for empowering students to relate to others and society, including the world after graduation. As a native-speaker teacher, I have also attempted to challenge the vertical relationship between the teacher and students in the classroom and to realize interactions among learners through my daily educational activities (Nishida 2021). However, not all students accept the idea of learning through interacting with others using foreign languages. It was reported that some students like the traditional ways of learning in the classroom such as focus on grammar (Alessandrini 2019), and they often refused to engage in interactions in the classroom (Nishida 2021). It is also observed that students tend to have anxiety, indifference and rejection against student-centered approaches (Weimer 2013). In other words, university students possibly also have a preference for being provided and equipped with knowledge by a university. Besides, a possible counterargument may be that universities are academic institutions, and therefore, they do not need to meet the expectations of the labor market or to focus on fostering interpersonal skills.

Against the background of the present situation of learners and traditional university education, the "Virtual Business Project" was a new challenge to realize horizontal learning in the context of experiential learning: e.g., outside the classroom but in the context of foreign language education at university. The Project was a practical experiment initiated by Mariotti's NolBrick research project that emphasizes dialogue between students to arrive at solutions for social problems through Japanese language education. Two of us, Nishida and Mariotti, who usually teach Japanese in the classroom, designed the Project as a job environment in which the participants can co-engage by using Japanese, but not as a place to acquire Japanese language skills. Based on the previous discussion of employability, soft skills and education emphasizing interactions, this study aims to show how internships or experiential learning can be an opportunity for students to overcome lecture-based learning whose goal is the acquisition of knowledge and to work actively and autonomously utilizing the acquired knowledge.

3.Methodology

3.1 Research question

This study attempts to answer how the Project, which aimed to promote learning in horizontal relationships with interactions among members, changed the participants' self-awareness of their skills and abilities before and after the project. This section explains 1) how the "Virtual Business Project" was conducted and 2) how this study investigated the Project to answer the research question.

3.2 The Project

3.2.1 Background of the Project

The Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari university of Venice, Italy requires internship experience as mandatory for graduation (75 hours for B.A. students and 150 hours for M.A students), and students usually seek internship opportunities both inside and outside the campus, including Japan. However, due to the pandemic limiting mobility even within Italy, students had difficulties in completing

internships. To cope with the pandemic, Mariotti initiated an on-campus internship program as part of the NoLBrick research project. She also realized the "Virtual ryuugaku for real interactions and job-hunting: supporting Covid online teaching of Japanese language oral and written production skills" funded by the Japan Foundation from February to March 2021. This project contained two sub-projects: 1) the "Virtual Study Abroad Project"; and 2) the "Virtual Business Project. Nishida participated in 2) the "Virtual Business Project" as the coordinator from planning to implementation.

3.2.2 Objective of the project

The primary objective was to provide the students with working experience during the pandemic. Besides, I and Mariotti planned the Project as an opportunity for the participants to increase awareness as a "social agent" (Council of Europe 2020) who affects society while interacting with others in a foreign language. In this Project, the participants were expected to collaborate with other members of the Project and to use Japanese in the process of working.

3.2.3 Participants

- 1) Ten students (six B.A. and four M.A.) participated in Virtual Business Projects as interns. The selection interview was conducted in advance by Mariotti and Nishida to see if they had enough motivation to complete the two months' project. Moreover, all ten participants had completed the course, "Japanese for business" offered by Mariotti and Nishida (Mariotti for theory and Nishida for practice) in 2019 or 2020. Therefore, they had an interest in business and some knowledge of Japanese for business purposes (e.g., interpretation and translation for negotiations, emails, and CV).
- 2) Nishida (Project coordinator) and Mariotti (Project director) participated in the project and supervised the students.

3.2.4 Time

The Project was conducted from 1 February to 31 March in 2021 (two months). The total number of working hours in the Project varied depending on the students. As mentioned above, to be accredited internship credits, B.A. students worked at least 75 hours while M.A. students worked at least 150 hours. One exception was Anna (B.A)t. She was expected to complete 150 hours of activity by the end of the Project because she received an internship stipend instead of the internship credits.

Table 1

Outline of the Project

Participants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 10 students (L.M. 4, B.A. 6) 2. Professor Mariotti (Project director) and Nishida (Project coordinator). Both teach Japanese for business purposes at Ca' Foscari University.
Time	February and March 2021 (8 weeks)
Expected achievements	<p>Online learning resources for supporting learning Japanese for job-hunting and other business purposes.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Online email composer; 2. Guide for writing a CV in Japanese 3. YouTube videos for learning Japanese for business

3.2.5 Expected achievements and the structure of the Project

By the end of the Project, the participants were required to realize three online learning resources which aim to support students learning Japanese for job-hunting and other business purposes. Three online materials are: 1) Online email composer; 2) Guide for writing a CV in Japanese; and 3) YouTube videos on job-hunting and other tips for working in Japan or in Japanese companies. All three resources were to be uploaded on "JaLea Business" (Japanese Language Learning System), developed by the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari university of Venice

(<https://jalea.unive.it/business/>). "JaLea Business" was open to all the Ca' Foscari users, and Nishida and Mariotti utilized this online learning platform for teaching activities.

Table 2

The three sections and participants' responsibilities

Responsibilities	Email Section	CV Section	Video Section
Scheduling	Anna (B.A., 3)	Roberto (M.A., 1)	Rebecca (M.A., 1)
Assessment of the products	Noemi (B.A., 3)	Serena (B.A., 3)	Emma (B.A., 3)
Checking Japanese	Luigi (M.A., 1)	Tiziana (M.A., 1)	
Creativity			Stefano (B.A., 3)
Technology	Enrico (B.A., 3)		

The participants were grouped into three sections according to the three resource types (See Table 2):

- 1) Email Section (responsible for the online email composer);
- 2) CV Section (responsible for the guide for writing a CV in Japanese);
- 3) Video Section (responsible for Youtube videos).

Each one of the participants had their own role in the section (See Table 2).

- 1) Scheduling. Each section had one person in charge of the schedule, and they were responsible for management in their own section and coordination among the three sections. They were also required to make a progress report in a weekly meeting with Nishida. We did not call them "Section Leaders" to avoid introducing a fixed hierarchical relationship among the participants.
- 2) Assessment of the products. These participants were responsible for examining if the learning materials they were making would be beneficial both for students learning by themselves and for teachers who want to use the materials in the classroom.
- 3) Checking Japanese (Only in the CV Section and the Email Section). These participants supported members mainly by checking Japanese linguistically.

- 4) Creativity (Only in the Video Section). This participant was expected to make the videos more enjoyable to students.
- 5) Technology (Only in the Email Section). This participant's knowledge of computer technology was expected to contribute to realizing the online learning resources.

Figure 1

Example of online learning materials: The guide for writing a CV in Japanese



The screenshot shows a website for 'jaleabusiness' with a navigation menu (HOME, SEZIONI, MEDIA, EXTRA, PROGETTI) and a search bar. The main heading is '履歴書のマスターへ' (Master of Resumes). Below it is an 'Introduzione' (Introduction) section in Italian, explaining that a Japanese resume (履歴書) is a formal document used in job hunting. It notes that while there is a standard format, it varies by company. The page displays two resume templates: one on the left labeled '左側' (left side) and one on the right labeled '右側' (right side). A note at the bottom states: 'Come si può evincere dall'immagine, si tratta di un documento schematico, alquanto breve e anonimo nella forma. Per facilitarne la comprensione, si è deciso di suddividerlo in due sezioni: * la parte sinistra (左側) include le informazioni personali del candidato, quali nome, indirizzo, contatti vari ed eventuali e la foto (obbligatoria). Nella tabella in basso vanno inserite le referenze scolastiche e lavorative.'

3.2.6 Engagement of two teachers in the Project

As already explained, myself and Mariotti participated in the Project as the Project coordinator and the Project director. The framework of the Project, including the time frame and the three deliverables above, were designed in advance by Nishida and Mariotti. However, the participants were responsible for all other processes of creating the learning materials, from planning the contents to realizing them. Except for the weekly meeting with three members in charge of scheduling, I did not work with them as long as the participants did not ask me to join them.

Because both of us are teachers of Japanese (e.g., Japanese for Business) in the department (Nishida: native-speaker teacher; Mariotti: professor and researcher of

language education), the participants might have expected us to instruct them throughout the Project. In contrast, we attempted to build different relationships with the participants from those we do in the classroom. We usually teach Japanese for business purposes in the classroom, but we designed the Project as a spin-off from the Japanese language course (See Table 3). The main objective of the Project was to make learning happen in more horizontal relationships among the participants rather than in a vertical relationship from teachers to students by avoiding instructing the participants in a unilateral manner during the Project.

Table 3

The Japanese language course (Japanese for Business) and the Project

Where	Inside the classroom	Outside the classroom
Content	Japanese language course (Japanese for Business)	On-campus internship
Main activities	Lectures and students' interactions	Student interactions
Prof. Mariotti and Nishida	Teachers	Project director and Project coordinator
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● B.A students (3rd year) ● 3 classes (Total 120 students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 10 M.A and B.A. students who took the course in the past ● Selected through interviews

3.3 Research method

Qualitative research was conducted. After the Project, all the participants were required to self-assess their achievement in the Project. This study analyzed the participants' comments in self-assessment. By carefully examining student's experiences of their internship (Hora, Parrott, and Pa 2020), I attempt to understand the participants' viewpoint of their experience and the skills or abilities that they believed to have acquired through the Project. The report has the following characteristics:

- 1) This self-assessment process was not prepared for this paper, but participants were asked to submit it as part of the accreditation procedure for the internship credits;
- 2) The participants knew that the Project director (Mariotti) and coordinator (Nishida) would read their reports, but they also knew that the contents and the quality of this report would not affect their evaluation as interns;
- 3) The report format did not specify the language they should use to fill out it, and they used either Italian or Japanese or both. I translated their answers in English for this study.

In addition, the self-assessment consisted of five predetermined open questions that asked participants to write one or more paragraphs for each of the questions. The five questions were:

- Q1. Write the reason for your participation in the Project;
- Q2. Describe what you did during the Project;
- Q3. What did you gain through the Project?;
- Q4. How do you benefit from the experience that you gained from the Project?;
- Q5. Free comments.

I examined the participant's description of specific skills or experiences mentioned in the self-assessment for the following purposes:

1) The answers to Q1 (Write the reason for your participation in the Project) and Q5 (Free comment) were investigated to know what original motivations the participants had in deciding to take part in the Project. I assumed that the responses to Q1 would demonstrate the participants' expectations, especially desired skills or experience they had wanted to gain through the Project;

2) The participants' answers to Q3 (What did you gain through the Project?), Q4 (How do you benefit from the experience that you gained from the Project?) and Q5 (Free comments) were analyzed to show which skills or experiences the participants believed to have acquired through the Project.

By comparing the initial expectations and assessment after the Project, this study attempts to show how the Project, which aimed to promote learning in horizontal relationships with interactions among members, changed the participants' self-awareness of their skills and abilities before and after the Project.

4. Study

4.1 Improvement of Japanese skills as an initial motivation

First, this section examines the participants' answers in their self-assessment to Q1: "Why did you decide to participate in the Project?." Self-assessment required the participants to write one or more paragraphs in answer to Q1, and most of them suggested multiple reasons for participating in the Project (e.g., Roberto wanted to improve his Japanese, to extend his knowledge of business and to gain practical experience). To understand the overall picture, I categorized the participants' descriptions of the initial motivations (Table 4). In sum, eight out of ten participants answered either to improve Japanese skills or to gain knowledge of business through the Project, or both. On the other hand, two students mentioned teamwork skills, and four students referred to practical experience. This result indicates that at the initial phase of the Project the participants' expectations to improve their knowledge or Japanese language skills were higher than their expectations to gain generic skills or soft skills.

As Table 4 shows, the most mentioned reason for participation was to improve proficiency of Japanese (7 of 10 participants). The students described the motivation to improve their Japanese skills or knowledge as follows:

- 1) Luigi: The reason why I participated in this project is that I wanted to utilize my Japanese ability. And the project would also be a good opportunity for me to review *keigo* (honorific forms and expressions). People often use *keigo* in the business world, but I don't have a chance to use it a lot in class. (M.A.1, Email Section. Originally written in Japanese.)
- 2) Anna: I decided to join this internship program because I wanted to learn more about business Japanese, especially about business emails. (...) Since I will leave for Japan in October 2021, I believed that this experience would help me

to use some useful knowledge. (B.A.3, Email Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

Improving knowledge of business was also mentioned by four students, and Serena, for example, explained as follows:

- 3) Serena: After taking the Japanese business course, I became more interested in job hunting and Japanese companies, and I wanted to learn more about it. So when I heard about this project, I immediately wanted to participate in it.

(B.A.3, CV Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

All three comments above show that the participants perceived the internship project as an occasion outside the classroom to strengthen their Japanese and other knowledge relating to the business world that they had already acquired in the Japanese language course (e.g., Japanese for business purposes).

Table 4

The answers to Q1. Write the reason for your participation in the Project.

Section	Name	Improve Japanese Proficiency	Extend the knowledge on business	Gain practical experience	Improve teamwork skills	Interest in making the learning materials
CV	Roberto	•	•	•		
	Serena		•			
	Tiziana	•				
Email	Anna	•				
	Enrico					•
	Luigi	•				
	Noemi	•				
Video	Rebecca			•	•	
	Emma	•	•	•	•	
	Stefano	•	•	•		
Total		7	4	4	2	1

4.2 Interpersonal skills as an outcome of the Project

The interactions in the Project probably had considerable impact on all participants' perspectives on valuable skills and experiences in a job context. In contrast to initial expectations for Japanese skills, the most mentioned skills in the answers to Q3 (What did you obtain through the Project?) were teamwork skills or collaboration skills, followed by Japanese language skills. To compare to their initial perspectives for the Project (Table 4), I classified the participants' descriptions regarding skills or experience acquired through the Project (Table 5) in the answers to Q3 and Q4 and Q5. Because of the open questions, the participants mentioned several different skills and experiences.

Table 5

The answers to Q3. and Q4 and Q 5*

Section	Name	Teamwork skills	Japanese skills	Computer skills	Knowledge on business	Leadership	Other soft skills**
CV	Roberto		•	•		•	
	Serena	•	•		•		•
	Tiziana	•	•				•
Email	Anna	•	•		•	•	
	Enrico	•					•
	Luigi	•	•				
	Noemi	•	•				
Video	Rebecca		•	•		•	•
	Emma	•		•	•		•
	Stefano	•		•			•
Total		8	7	4	3	3	6

*Q3. What did you gain through the Project?; Q4. How do you benefit from the experience that you gained from theProject?; Q5.Free comments.

**Other soft skills include analytical skills, responsibility, consistency, flexibility, communication skills, time management, creativity, autonomy.

As Table 5 shows, the most frequently mentioned skills (8 of 10 participants) as the outcome of the Project were teamwork skills such as working with others, working

in a team, collaborating with members. The other two students did not use terms such as teamwork, but instead, they used "leadership" or "management skills" to express the acquired skills through the Project. So it can be concluded that all 10 participants evaluated interpersonal experience or interpersonal skills in a work context as a positive outcome of the Project.

This result contrasts with the students' initial expectations of the participation (Table 4). As we have seen, before the Project, the majority of them were motivated by improving Japanese skills and knowledge on business through the Project, while fewer students (two of ten participants) mentioned interpersonal skills or other soft skills. This change observed in the self-assessment suggests that experiential learning in the Project created a considerable impact on the participants' awareness in terms of team working. It can be concluded that the Project enabled the participants to: 1) have experiences of interacting with others effectively in a job context; 2) increase self-confidence in interpersonal experiences and skills gained through the experiences.

4.3 Contributing factors for high self-evaluation in interpersonal skills

4.3.1 Success in developing a sense of teamwork

This section attempts to investigate more specifically why this project successfully helped students gain interpersonal experience, skills and confidence in a working context. Although the European Higher Education Area (2016) pointed out that "Higher education institutions are all-time experts in providing subject-specific knowledge but less experienced in cultivating "soft skills" at the same time", the Project seems to have been successful in developing soft skills of the participants beyond education focusing on *equipment of the knowledge*. The next question to be answered is, more specifically, through which experiences or aspects of the Project did the participants become confident in their interpersonal skills. If we can specify the elements that increase awareness of collaboration and make students confident in working with others, this study can provide suggestions as to what university education can do inside (e.g., language courses) or outside of the classroom (e.g., experiential

learning such as internship programs) to develop students' soft skills, especially interpersonal skills, that are considered lacking in European higher education institutions. With this objective, I decided to further analyze the participants' self-assessment comments that mentioned teamwork.

4.3.2 From Japanese as *knowledge* to Japanese as interpersonal experience

First of all, I would like to highlight that, besides interpersonal skills, the participants also had opportunities in the Project to acquire Japanese language skills, which the participants had high expectations of before the Project. All the learning materials they created were for the purpose of learning Japanese, and in order to create these materials, they themselves needed to study Japanese and incorporate the results of their study into the materials. In fact, seven out of the ten students wrote in their self-assessment that they had successfully developed Japanese language skills through the Project. For example, two participants described Japanese language skills in relation to their practical experience in the Project:

- 1) Rebecca: I have learned to deliver messages effectively without thinking too much about grammar. This is because (...) I need to respond quickly to emails, meetings, etc. I had to be very focused on what I wanted to say. (M.A.1, Video Section. Originally written in Japanese.)
- 2) Tiziana: In the course of the project, I not only improved my Japanese, but also built strong team relationships and utilized my teamwork skills. (M.A.1, CV Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

Other two participants described specifically in what situations they will use it in the future or how they will use Japanese in a job environment as below:

- 1) Luigi: I can use my experience in the project both to write emails to Japanese companies and to teach students how to write business emails. (M.A.1, Email Section. Originally written in Japanese.)
- 2) Noemi: I would like to work for a trading company in the future. So, I think the experience I gained from the project will be useful. I think I

will be able to use my Japanese well when I write emails. (B.A.3, Email Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

It seems that they improved Japanese knowledge through the Project, but on top of this are now also aware of how to use the skills in a concrete way. Through learning by experience in the Project, the participants seemed to realize how they can use Japanese to interact with others in society or in their future jobs as "social agents" (Council of Europe 2020, 21). The Project shows that the participants were able to achieve this awareness through intensive interactions with the learners of Japanese as a foreign language through the Project, without doing internships in Japan or Japanese companies. So through which experiences or aspects of the Project did the participants become confident in their interpersonal skills? One of the answers can be their practical experience of using Japanese in a working environment, which encouraged them to reevaluate their skills or knowledge on Japanese in an interpersonal and social context.

4.4 Responsibility and role in a fluid horizontal relationship

4.4.1 Awareness of responsibility and role

Further examination of the participants' comments regarding teamwork highlights that the participants became well aware of what role they were playing and of what contribution they wanted to make in this Project. Everyone of them probably gained a sense of role (i.g., responsibility, contribution and one's own significance in the Project) through working and this might be one of the reasons for the success of the Project from the point of view of developing interpersonal skills and awareness of collaboration. Whereas the participants mentioned teamwork in their self-assessments, they often explained how they played their part in the team as well. Noemi and Enrico, for example, explained that they discovered their own role in contributing to the section in the process of collaboration with other members.

- 1) Noemi: Through the project, I improved my teamwork skills. Each of us had our own work to do, but we helped each other and checked what the others had written. (B.A.3, Email Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

- 2) Enrico: In fact, to achieve the goals set by the team and the project leader, we had to carefully consider the ideas and opinions of each team member. In particular, this improved my ability to explain the functional and technical aspects of JaleaBusiness to my colleagues. (B.A.3, Email Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

The comments of the two students above showed that they successfully worked together based on horizontal relationships among the section members. And, as Enrico, who had good computer literacy skills, showed more clearly, in the process of collaboration they seemingly increased self-awareness of how they could contribute to the team and the Project by using their strength.

4.4.2 Fluidity in the horizontal relationship

Besides the self-awareness of their own responsibility, it was observed that the horizontal relationship among the participants does not mean homogeneously and consistently horizontal, but instead, more dynamic and fluid. And this dynamic in the relationships among the participants seemingly contributed to making learning, especially learning of interpersonal skills, happen in the Project. One of the examples is the relationships between the students from different grades (e.g., B.A. students and M.A. students) in the Project. I would like to focus on the relationship in the Mail Section between third-year B.A. student Emma and Rebecca, who was a first-year M.A. student and responsible for managing schedules in the Mail Section.

- 1) Emma: I was anxious if I would be able to make videos or edit them, but I gave it a shot and thanks to the other video team members, I became able to collaborate with them, and now I am able to use YouTube and video editing software. (...) And as I expected, I have developed a sense of responsibility as well as teamwork skills. I was able to produce it because I learned from my section leader's way of cooperating with others and her working style. (B.A.3, Video Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

The "leader" in Emma's comment (i.g., " my section leader's way of cooperating") means Rebecca in the same Section, and Emma seemed to appreciate Rebecca's

leadership and its positive effect on teamwork. On the other hand, Rebecca's following comment also shows that Rebecca herself was very conscious of her responsibility in the team, especially in taking leadership and managing the other two members.

2) Rebecca: As the leader of the Video-section, I was in a position to clearly communicate the plan to section members, and consequently, we were able to complete 15 videos without any troubles and delay. (M.A.1, Video Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

The comments of Emma and Rebecca taken together suggest that a leader-member relationship existed (e.g., the relationship between them was not consistently and simply horizontal, but they built a more fluid relationship between them). Emma respected Rebecca's leadership and learned from Rebecca's behavior. This relationship was not imposed by the teachers or any external authority, but it spontaneously emerged between them when they shared the objective of producing good learning material.

This dynamic of relationships among participants is also observed in self-assessment comments of Serena, a third-year B.A. student who worked in the CV Section. Reflecting on the Project, Serena wrote:

- I was a little nervous knowing that I would be working with first-year graduate students, but now I know that I learned a lot from this. This changed anxiety to gratefulness and confidence about the opportunity;
- This was an important opportunity to start learning how to consult with superiors and how to work together as a team. I'm happy for the opportunity to get involved in new things. We had to create materials together "from zero" (I'm particularly talking about the CV Guide). We discovered and understood how we would be able to improve the contents little by little together. (B.A.3, CV Section. Originally written in Japanese.)

The comments above indicate that Serena transformed the initial anxiety to a factor that helped her gain confidence in working with those who have different backgrounds.

Serena's initial anxiety, as with the relationship between Emma and Rebecca, suggests that learning in horizontal relationships in the Project did not constitute interacting with "friends" without feeling pressure or stress. The participants learned teamwork because

they discovered their own role and cultivated relationships among them to achieve their goals in the Project.

During the Project, the students were observed to construct more fluid relationships in which every member can teach and learn from each other beyond the fixed role (Mariotti 2020b). This fluidity was not forced or planned in advance by the teachers, the external authorities, but each student discovered their own role and constructed relationships among them in accordance with their objectives.

In contrast, the vertical relationship between "student and teacher" tends to make the students consider themselves to be just one of many others and wait to be instructed by the teachers. This may reinforce the fixed relationship and the passive learning attitude of students as I pointed out before. In the Project, the participants, who were aware of his or her own role in the horizontal relationships, actively participated in the learning process, and this is the significance of experiential learning compared to learning in the classroom. This is one example of horizontal learning in which the teachers let go of their role of guiding the students and also allowing them to let their role of students go.

4.5 Experience of overcoming unexpected events

The experience of overcoming confusion, anxiety and troubles throughout the Project was probably essential to foster a sense of teamwork among the participants. According to the participant's comments, three aspects of the Project created pressure for the participants:

- 1) Delivery deadline (i.e., the participants needed to complete the products in two months);
- 2) Autonomy (i.e, the participants were expected to plan, design and realize the online learning materials on their own);
- 3) Responsibility (i.e., the participants had to solve unexpected problems and troubles on their own in the process of realizing the learning materials).

Enrico, for instance, expressed that he had an anxious feeling about aspects 1) the strict deadline and 2) their task.

- 1) Enrico: This project has taught me to manage deadlines and to collaborate with other colleagues. Initially, the project and the proposed objectives left me slightly disconcerted, as the time available was tight, and the tasks to be completed were quite complex, especially the production of the mail builder. (B.A.3, Email Section)

So Enrico had anxiety at the initial phase of the Project. However, at the same time, these two aspects resulted in encouraging the participants to collaborate with the other members and to realize the demanding task assigned to the section.

The members of the Video Section experienced the struggles between autonomy and responsibility. Due to the pandemic, they could not get together any more to film the videos in public places, including university facilities, and they needed to deal with unexpected events and discover the solutions to continue their tasks in the middle of the Project.

- 2) Rebeca: "I struggled with the limitations of smart working: problems of internet connections; difficulty in finding suitable locations for recordings due to the blocking of face-to-face activities in March: to exchange and edit video clips after remote consultation with other section members. However, there are many more things I remember with pleasure: such as the moments when all the difficulties listed above were overcome. (M.A. 1, Video Section. Originally written in Italian).
- 3) Stefano: The skill that I perfected more than anything is teamwork. I know that is often said whenever you collaborate in a group, but this experience was so professionally fulfilling and included great responsibility, so that the method of work and cooperation was essential. Above all because, unfortunately, we weren't always able to meet in person. Considering the "physical" nature of the tasks, we needed to meet together. It wasn't at all easy to find effective solutions. (B.A. 3, Video Section. Originally written in Italian)
- 4) Emma: Because of the coronavirus, we decided to collaborate on Zoom, and we completed the job according to schedule! (B.A. 3, Video Section. Originally written in Japanese).

Their comments show that they associated the most challenging aspects of the Project with opportunities to gain teamwork experiences. In this Project, the participants were not guided by the teachers as in the classroom. It has already been reported that the students, who get used to being guided by teachers in the classroom, might feel panic and confusion in an active learning style classroom (Weimer 2013). However, at the same time, a sense of confusion can be seen as an essential part of autonomous learning (Nishida 2021). Returning to the questions that I posited previously, it is now possible to say that the participants often described their team working experience while also mentioning their experience of overcoming difficulties with the team members.

5. Conclusions

In the Project, the participants increased their self-awareness of their own potential to engage with others to achieve shared objectives in a job context. This is one of the answers to the research question: how did the project, which aimed to promote learning in horizontal relationships with interactions among members, change the participants' self-awareness of their skills and abilities before and after the project? In the horizontal learning in the Project, the participants were observed to have intensive interpersonal experiences and, consequently, to have gained the belief that they were successful in teamwork. The Project also demonstrated that learners of Japanese can gain interpersonal experience and confidence where they are, even without visiting Japan, if they engage with other learners as "colleagues" and actively interact with them while using Japanese.

Overall, throughout the Project, three elements relating to teamwork were observed: 1) The participants achieved self-awareness of their role and responsibility in the team; 2) The relationships between teaching and being taught emerged spontaneously and fluidly within the teams to accomplish the objectives of the Project (i.e., realizing online learning of high quality); 3) Dealing with unexpected troubles or difficult events strengthened a sense of teamwork. The three elements fostering a sense of teamwork were realized because the participants had a space for horizontal interactions with other participants, free from the fixed vertical structure in the

classroom. So the result of the study indicates that the "absence" of the teachers in the Project positively affected the cultivation of a sense of teamwork among the participants.

As a conclusion of the study, I would like to suggest that experiential learning, which is designed with "absence" of the teachers, can be advantageous in fostering interpersonal skills, compared to learning in the classroom with the teachers who tend to equip students with *knowledge*. To acquire interpersonal skills, the first thing university students should do is obviously interact with others. However, before the Project, only a few participants seemed to be interested in developing interpersonal skills, with more students mentioning that their objectives for the Project was to deepen their knowledge and Japanese skills. This might be the manifestation of the participants' value system regarding the skills. Probably due to limited experience in being evaluated for interpersonal skills in university education, their awareness of interpersonal skills was seemingly low at the initial phase of the Project. Reflecting the existing values of knowledge in university education, they, therefore, hoped that the Project would also enable them to extend their knowledge. So the problem is that, as Mariotti (2020 a) pointed out, an emphasis on knowledge or proficiency often prevents learners from focusing on constructing relationships with others through interactions. Therefore, to decrease the participants' high concern for language proficiency and to make meaningful interactions happen among the participants, the teachers in the Project let their role as teachers go and, instead, attempted to co-engage (Mariotti 2020a) in the job process as the collaborators with them. Consequently, through experiential learning in the Project, all participants put higher value on interpersonal skills, such as teamwork and leadership, and gained a more concrete image of how they can use Japanese in an interpersonal context.

The results of the Project can further support Sato's proposal (2014) for teachers to stop teaching and let learners have initiative for their learning. The results of the Project also contributed to the objective of the NoLBrick research project, demonstrating that by critically examining the fixed relationship between teacher and students, Japanese language education in university can empower learners through

interactions (Mariotti, 2020b) in a job context as well. From the viewpoint of career education, the Project achieved a successful outcome because, as we have seen, interpersonal skills can positively affect employability of university graduates. So in terms of education for employability, university education can start by decreasing its focus on *knowledge* and making a space for interaction among students. In this respect, experiential learning has a potential to become the space outside the classroom for not teaching in vertical relationships but for interactions in horizontal relationships among participants. This space can empower students to become social agents who can have an impact on society where they are right now through interactions with other students in the same place.

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