**Abstract**
The purpose of this essay is to propose an idea to address the inequality in compulsory education which stems from economic and geographical issues, especially in the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). The number of students in elementary and junior high schools on the islands has always been small. Schools on a small island offer good conditions for English education because of the low teacher-student ratio. Teachers can provide individual attention to students; however, students in such schools are disadvantaged, unlike their counterparts in a large city, because their geographical location limits their opportunities to exchange opinions, to practice listening to various English pronunciations and expressions, to learn about multicultural phenomena, and to meet people from other areas in Japan and from other countries. These advantages and disadvantages are true of schools on small islands and in secluded areas in other countries wherever students learn English as a foreign language. A potential solution is to provide an English class in a cyber-metropolitan city, or i-City, for students on small Japanese islands, as well as for students from various ethnic backgrounds in secluded areas in other countries who can be connected with each other through Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The results of a practice lesson show the true potential that the English class in the i-City contains, as an idea to address the inequality in compulsory education. The i-City will be able to improve academic ability in English and facilitate peace in the world.

Keywords: English education as Foreign Language (EFL), Small Islands, Secluded Areas, Inequality of Education Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Cross-cultural Understanding.
Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to propose an idea to address the inequality in compulsory education which stems from economic and geographical issues, especially in the learning of English as a foreign language; to show the results of a practice lesson; to discuss the significance and potential of an idea for a solution to the problem of inequality in education; and to highlight the issues which still present a challenge.

The Issues and an Idea for a Solution

Japan is comprised of many large and small islands. The number of students in elementary and junior high schools on the islands has always been small. In recent years, the number has been decreasing rapidly due to the declining birthrate across the nation. As a result, many schools have been abolished or merged, or often, students are educated in combined classes.

As we have discussed elsewhere, such an educational environment is advantageous in some respects and disadvantageous in others for students in EFL education. Schools on a small island offer good conditions for English education because of the low teacher-student ratio. Teachers can provide individual attention to students; however, students in such schools are disadvantaged, unlike their counterparts in a large city, because their geographical location limits their opportunities to exchange opinions, to practice listening to various English pronunciations and expressions, to learn about multicultural phenomena, and to meet people from other areas in Japan and from other countries. These advantages and disadvantages are true of schools on small islands and in secluded areas in other countries wherever students learn English as a foreign language. If there is a solution to the problems stemming from geographical isolation, schools on islands and in isolated areas of the world can provide at least as effective an English education (if not better) as schools in large cities.

A potential solution is to provide an English class in a cyber-metropolitan city, or i-City, for students on small Japanese islands, as well as for students from various ethnic backgrounds in secluded areas in other countries who can be connected with each other through Information and Communications Technology (ICT) (Figure 1). People who reside in large Japanese cities often come from different rural communities. If students from small islands get together and communicate with each other in a given area, they can learn English in an educational environment similar to that in large cities. The educational environment can be created by ICTs, especially through a telecommunication/teleconference system, such as Skype or Google Hangouts. They can create a school in a virtual cyber-metropolitan city, or i-City, where students can experience and learn diverse cultures, thoughts, expressions, and different pronunciations of English. They can engage in an exchange of opinions, just like their peers in large cities. The i-City can be a global society as well, when schools on small islands or in secluded areas of the world are connected by ICTs. In fact, Qin Li’s article (2014) shows that elementary school students in East Asia have faced a similar issue to the one we have identified in Japan. The authors now know that this is the reason why Chen Haowu et al. (2014) have instituted a fund and are working for the establishment of a domestic network of schools in secluded areas in China through ICTs. Their aim is to resolve the problems associated with educational inequality that stem from the geographic locations of schools.

---

1 As for the discussion in this chapter, see A. Suzuki, S. Kurata, N. Nakamura, and K.
Carrying out the Project

In the winter of 2017 we set up an English class as a project, and the fifth grade, or eleven-year-old, students of two elementary schools in Japan joined the class with the use of Skype and large screen displays. The two schools are on the Gotō island in Nagasaki prefecture and the Sado island in Niigata prefecture.

In preparation for the class, we discussed the theme, the top-task, the activities, the contents, the class schedule, and so on with the classroom teachers of both schools. Generally speaking, an elementary school teacher in Japan has to use textbooks in class which are approved by the Ministry of Education in Japan. The textbook for English is *Hi, friends!* The teachers chose a lesson from this book, Lesson 7, which was suitable for the joint English class, and its theme was “to express an idea plainly and clearly in English.” Consequently, the activities for the class were as follows: the students of each school split into four groups and one group set a quiz for the students of the other school on their own characteristic, cultural or historical matters or events; the students in one of the groups from the other school answered the quiz; then the students who set the quiz told the other students the correct answers. They then made a short presentation as an introduction to their culture in a way which could be easily understood. The students of both schools did the quiz-answer-presentation activities eight times so that each group of students had a turn. Before the day of the class, the students had prepared for their presentations, choosing topics from the exhaustive list of themes that are used in an English class to promote cross-cultural understanding, and which are in the book *Language and Children: Making the Match* (1994) by H. Curtain & C. A. Pesola, which has been regarded as an authoritative source for learning the English language and culture of English-speaking countries during compulsory schooling years in the U.S. and in Japan. Also, we suggested that in the presentation, the students of the two elementary schools should share a socio-cultural and geographic fact, for instance, that they live on small islands surrounded by the sea, because as Zhang Longxi, a distinguished scholar of cross-cultural understanding and comparative studies, points out (2015), it is critical for mutual understanding in a global society that there is a recognition of affinity as well as difference, beyond that of socio-cultural differences. On the day of the class, two of our research members stayed in the classrooms to set up the ICT communication system and to observe the class. As the photos show (Figure 3), the students were excited and enjoyed their English activities which took place in a positive atmosphere.
After the class, we gave out a questionnaire using free-answer questions about the class to the 21 students and the three teachers of the schools who had taken part. Generally speaking, the students were very satisfied with the class in the i-City and they felt that the use of the large screen displays caused students to feel as if they had talked in English in the same space. According to their answers in the questionnaire, they have usually and always practiced English with the same students whom they have known from their time in kindergarten, and they were excited to talk with students of different cultural backgrounds for the first time in their lives. It meant that, in the words of one of the elementary school teachers, “students, who had been bored in English classes because the members of the group were always the same, could broaden their horizons and perspectives, by meeting with new faces, new cultures, and pronunciations and expressions of English they had not experienced before; and they could see how wonderful it is to experience a connection with people and develop
mutual understanding; and discover what self-worth they could build in being part of humanity and in their academic ability in English by making themselves understood in English and developing a mutual understanding.”

Analysis of the answers in the questionnaire showed other important outcomes of the class. For instance, students felt stimulated and empowered by each other which led to an increase in their levels of motivation to learn more English and also to learn more about each other’s culture; students in each school admired the pronunciation, expression and management of English and the quick and correct response in English of the students in the other schools, and all of them wanted to improve their English and hoped that they could join the English class in the i-City again. In another interesting answer, some students became interested in the topic not through the quiz-answer-presentation activities but rather because of the students’ family names which are not common in their home areas. In other words, they became interested in the people themselves. It should also be noted as a consequence of the project that the English class in the i-City had a big impact on the teachers as well. All of them wrote in the questionnaire that the English teaching of the teachers in the other schools was very informative and helpful for their own teaching. In this sense, the teachers, who always work with the same teachers on an island, were also stimulated and empowered by each other and experienced an increase in motivation to learn more about how to educate students better.

In actual fact, we conducted the first pilot case of an English joint class in the i-City in 2016, by connecting elementary schools on an island in Nagasaki prefecture and in a secluded area in Hokkaido, i.e., the western and eastern points in Japan (Figure 4). The results and answers to the questionnaire were very similar to the ones from the class this time (S. Kurata, N. Nakamura, A. Suzuki, and K. Matsumoto, 2017). Thus, it can be concluded that what we mentioned earlier in this paper as the outcomes of the project were not the result of some incidental cause, such as good chemistry, but show the true potential that the English class in the i-City contains.

![Figure 4: Schools in Nagasaki and Hokkaido](image)

**Conclusion**

As an idea to address the inequality in compulsory education which stems from economic and geographical issues, especially in the learning of English as a foreign language, English class in the i-City contains the true potential.
However, there are issues which still need to be addressed in the development of the i-City. During the process, we faced several difficulties. For instance, the stability of the internet communication still requires consideration. This is especially the case on an island which has a poor infrastructure of internet connection, such as Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL). In fact, at the time of our project, one of the islands only had ADSL, which slightly lowered the volume while transmitting the students’ voices to each other and this meant the students had to speak loudly and clearly, though as a result it gave them good practice in speaking English.

A major issue to consider is the political bigotry of those in control, such as the principal, vice-principal, director, and the school board. As the American novel *The Main Street* by Nobel Prize winning author, Sinclair Lewis shows, some of those in control on islands and in secluded areas, though not all of them, do not like students to have interaction with students in other areas and other countries. They stick to “their own way,” are afraid of a kind of brainwashing of students and of their own responsibilities. It means that they do not like expanding human horizons, but this view is totally out of date in a global society. Another issue of bigotry lies with parents. Especially in East Asia, many parents just want school to focus on teaching as preparation for an entrance examination so that their children can get into a “better school” in the future, and hence the leader of the school often succumbs to pressure from parents and refuses cross-cultural education. This is also an issue in the mind of the well-known American psychologist and educator, Carl Rogers, who created the concepts of counseling in schools and colleges and “Student-centered Education” and used words such as “facilitator,” “empowerment,” etc. in psychological and educational terms. Rogers also faced similar issues when he tried to facilitate interaction between students, parents, and other adults in one area and between them and people in other areas.

At present we are proceeding with our project and will soon run an English class using ICTs for students of several elementary schools on islands in Japan and in other countries. With reference to Rogers’ experiences and his ideas (C. Rogers 1961/1995, 1969; T. Kuwamura 2010), we are trying to resolve the issues and make education in the i-City have the greatest possible effect on students’ learning, in order to solve the problems of inequality in education which stem from geography and economics, and in doing so facilitate peace in the world: we are making the platform of the i-City so that teachers and students who find themselves on small islands and in secluded areas all over the world can freely and at any time interact with each other in English to practice the language and develop mutual understanding, with the hope that it will improve academic ability in English and facilitate peace in the world. If you are interested, let us cooperate together. We would welcome all of you for the sake of all of the children and young people in the world.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP16K02841.

---

2 As for their concern about brainwashing, see Habsbawm (1990).
References


Kurata, S., Nakamura, N., Suzuki, A., and Matsumoto, K. (2017). A joint class in schools on an island and in a secluded area: Using the ICTs in English activities in elementary school (“Ritō・hekichi ni okeru gakkōkankōyū no jissen——Shōgakkō gaikokugo katsudō ni okeru ICT no katsuyō wo tōshite——”). *Journal of Educational Practice Center of Faculty of Education at Nagasaki University, 16,* 225-29.


