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All articles in these proceedings underwent a single-blind peer review process. The reason for it being "single-blind" as opposed to "double-blind" stems from the fact that, since all submissions were based on a conference presentation that occurred prior to the review, the reviewers had access to the name of the presenters via the published conference program.

PREFACE

It is with great pleasure that we share this selection of works presented at the 2nd Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Intercultural Communication in Language Education Special Interest Group (ICLE SIG) and Global Issues in Language Education (GILE) Joint Conference, which was held on September 28th, 2024. This event, focused on *Exploring Diverse Identities: Developing Intercultural Sensitivity in Japan*, brought together researchers, practitioners, and graduate students from Japan and abroad who share an interest in the nexus of language education, intercultural communicative competence, identity, and global perspectives.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected yet marked by diverse identities, the need for fostering intercultural understanding has never been more pressing. Japan, known for its rich cultural heritage and technological advancements, stands at a unique crossroads of tradition and modernity. As our society becomes more globally integrated, individuals and institutions in Japan must embrace diversity and cultivate intercultural sensitivity. The collaboration between the ICLE SIG (with its focus on intercultural communication in language education) and the GILE SIG (with its emphasis on global issues in language education) provided an ideal platform to explore how language educators and researchers might address these issues in synergy, rather than in parallel.

This year's proceedings bring together three papers that collectively explore the evolving intersections of identity, intercultural engagement, and global education in Japan. Building on the theme of student development, Kelly J. King's contribution, *Service-Learning as a Way Forward*, investigates how experiential learning can deepen student understanding of and engagement with immigrant youth in Japan. The study demonstrates that service-learning encourages reflection, critical awareness, and context-responsive advocacy. Continuing the theme of student perspectives on global belonging, Suprateek Chatterjee's paper, *Comfortable at Home, Curious Abroad*, analyzes how attitudes of Japanese exceptionalism shape students' interest in studying or living overseas. The results reveal that while many students express curiosity toward international experiences, a strong attachment to cultural comfort and national pride often leads to searching for short-term opportunities to study or work abroad. Finally, Masahito Watanabe's paper, *Four Needs of Japanese English Language Learners for Fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence*, examines Japanese participation in a multi-country online exchange project.

His analysis identifies the weakness of intercultural communicative attitudes in Japanese students and stresses the necessity of nationwide recognition of cultural awareness as a curricular goal.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the many individuals and institutions whose support made this event possible: our keynote speaker, Dr. Hussam Zaineh, session chairs, reviewers, paper presenters, student volunteers, and local organising team. We are grateful to the host institution, Kanda University of International Studies, and to the JALT ICLE and GILE SIG executive committees for their vision and contributions. Special thanks go to all participants for their willingness to share, critique, and learn from one another in the spirit of collaboration.

These proceedings capture the conference presentations that proceeded through peer review and revision, and we hope they will serve as a useful resource for scholars and practitioners working in intercultural language education, learner autonomy, identity work, and beyond. May it stimulate new ideas, spark collaborative research, inspire classroom innovation, and contribute to deeper understandings of diverse identities in language learning.

In closing, we would like to express our appreciation for all presenters, conference attendees, SIG members, reviewers and officers for their invaluable support in making our second joint conference, and this valuable publication, succeed.

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Conflict Service-Learning as a Way Forward: University Students Supporting and Advocating for Immigrant Youth in Japan

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Abstract

Service-learning (SL) is an experiential pedagogical approach that engages students in meaningful community service while promoting learning through ongoing cycles of reading, action, reflection, and dialogue with peers. This study draws on an Action Research (AR) framework to explore how students actively engaged with an SL course offered by the author at a small faculty of a national university in western Japan. Through a content analysis of students' reflective journals, the study examines the processes by which students navigated interactions with local minority youth and educational settings, reflected critically on inequities in immigrant education, and developed strategies for advocacy. Findings suggest that sustained engagement in SL fosters not only reflection but also active, context-sensitive approaches to supporting immigrant children, highlighting the pedagogical value of experiential learning in higher education.

要旨

サービス・ラーニング（Service-Learning, SL）は、学生が地域社会において意義ある奉仕活動に参加しつつ、読書、実践、自己省察、仲間との対話を継続的に行うことで学びを深める体験的教育手法である。本研究は、アクション・リサーチ（Action Research, AR）の枠組みに基づき、西日本の国立大学の小規模学部で筆者が開講した SL 科目における学生の主体的な学びの過程を明らかにすることを目的とする。学生による省察的ジャーナルの内容分析を通して、学生が地域のマイノリティの若者や教育現場との関わりをどのように経験し、教育上の不平等についてどのように批判的に省察し、支援やアドボカシーの方法を構築していったかを検討した。その結果、SL への継続的な参加は、単なる省察にとどまらず、移民の子どもたちを支援するための文脈に応じた主体的な学習行動を促すことが示唆され、大学における体験的学習の教育的意義が確認された。

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In Japan's current social and political climate, media coverage and political discourse often portray immigrants as threats to local and national security, creating social tensions and posing educational challenges for immigrant youth. University educators, therefore, face the task of providing students with opportunities to actively cultivate advocacy, empathy, and social justice awareness. In response, a service-learning (SL) course in a small city in western Japan with a growing and increasingly diverse foreign resident population offers students a space to engage critically with Japanese immigration policy and the lived experiences of local immigrants. While international research has documented the potential of SL to foster these capacities, few studies have examined how Japanese programs support students in taking an active role in advocating for marginalized communities, leaving a critical gap in the literature.

As a long-term foreign resident of Japan and a full-time faculty member at a national university, I am aware of my positionality and the privileges it affords, including access to academic networks and institutional resources. At the same time, being a non-native Japanese speaker and outsider to local school communities has shaped my sense of place and professional identity. When I transitioned from another university setting, I initially experienced a sense of isolation, unsure of what "my community" was and questioning where I belong and how I might contribute meaningfully. While I am able to perform professional duties and maintain close relationships in Japanese, I sometimes feel constrained in fully expressing myself or in navigating complex social and professional contexts. This awareness has heightened my sensitivity to the dynamics affecting both immigrant families and those who, like myself, seek to support and collaborate with them.

In the late 2000s, I conducted a qualitative study examining middle school teachers' attitudes toward immigrant children (King, 2013). Through this research I found that although many teachers demonstrated care and warmth toward their students, subtle biases often persisted—particularly toward children from working-class immigrant families. Some teachers appeared to view immigrant students through an assimilationist lens, framing them as problems to be managed, rather than as valuable contributors to Japanese society with unique knowledge and experiences. These findings echoed patterns identified in other studies of Japanese schooling (see Haeno, 2017; Ota, 2000) and highlighted the need to examine the effects of immigration policy and educational practice on local immigrant populations, as well as pedagogical approaches that empower students to act as advocates for social equity.

In 2018, service-learning (SL) pedagogy was new to me, but it appeared well aligned with the mission of my faculty, The School of Global and Community Studies (GCS), which was established in 2016. Although it is the smallest faculty in the university, it is the only one explicitly dedicated to community engagement and to fostering students' capacity for intercultural understanding**.** These objectives are consistent with Japanese university education reforms over the past 20 years which have emphasized more student-centered learning, including active learning and experiential methodologies (Fukudome, 2019). One of the three pillars of GCS is its project-based learning (PBL) curriculum, designed to connect university students with local organizations in collaborative, community-centered projects while fostering critical thinking and leadership skills. Within this curricular framework, I was able to implement the SL course on which this study is based at the departmental level. At the time, it was the only PBL course that focused on supporting foreign residents in the local community and that recognized immigrants as a community resource.

In practice, the SL course that is the focus of this study centers on supporting children and young adults in local schools within the prefecture who are either foreign residents of Fukui or language-minority students, including Japanese nationals who do not speak Japanese as their first language. It is currently the faculty's only English-medium PBL course. Although students enrolled in the course are not training to become teachers, they bring educational and linguistic backgrounds that may support their work with immigrant children. All students are bilingual or multilingual, and most have experience studying in a non-native language, attending overseas institutions, or living as foreign nationals.

Many students also bring educational experiences shaped by Japan's increasing diversity during the 2010s, a period in which the number of immigrant and immigrant-background children in public schools grew substantially, as documented by a growing body of research on their educational experiences and needs (Haeno, 2017; Homma, 2021; Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2021; Tokunaga, 2018; Yamamoto, 2014). Some students studied alongside immigrant peers in elementary and secondary schools, while others are themselves foreign nationals who were born and raised in Japan. These diverse linguistic and educational histories likely contribute both to students' interest in supporting immigrant children and to their decision to enroll in the SL course.

Taken together, these features position the course as a setting in which students do not simply learn *about* immigrant youth, but work alongside them in everyday educational

spaces. Through sustained interaction with children and young adults navigating Japanese public schools, students are confronted with the practical consequences of language policy, institutional expectations, and uneven support structures. As multilingual learners with varying degrees of personal familiarity with educational diversity in Japan, students are required to consider how their own experiences shape the ways they respond to immigrant youth, recognize structural barriers, and define their responsibilities—and limitations—as supporters.

It is this combination of sustained engagement and student reflection that the present study examines, focusing on how participation in the SL course may shape students' attitudes toward immigrant youth, their understanding of educational obstacles, and their sense of responsibility as supporters.

To explore these dynamics, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What attitudes do SL students display toward the immigrant youth they support?
2. What understandings do SL students have of the obstacles faced by immigrant youth in Japanese public schools?
3. How do SL students understand and feel about their role as supporters of, and their impact on, immigrant youth?

Literature Review

Schooling of Immigrant Youth in Japan

Research on immigrant children's experiences in Japanese education emerged in the 1990s, following the 1990 revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act. This policy change led to a rapid influx of Brazilian and other South American Nikkeijin[1] migrant laborers and their families (Tsuda, 2003; Yamanaka, 1996). During this period, Nikkeijin and other foreign nationals and their children came to be referred to as newcomers (*nyūkamā*) distinguishing them from oldcomers—long-term residents of Korean and Chinese descent (Kojima, 2006; Ota, 2000). With the increase of *nyūkamā* children, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) began the process of developing Japanese as second language (JSL) curricula and materials and began tracking the number

[1] Nikkeijin are defined here as Latin Americans, mostly Brazilians, of Japanese descent who came to work and settle in Japan in the 1990s and afterwards as a direct result of the 1990 changes in Japanese immigration law, which encouraged Japanese descendants to apply for long-term resident visas and work as unskilled workers in Japan.

of immigrant and language minority (LM) children requiring Japanese language instruction (Green, 2014; Vaipae, 2001).

Early research on immigrant children in Japan primarily documented difficulties related to language acquisition, school adaptation, and classroom participation (Haeno, 2017). Over the past three decades, studies have consistently shown that, without substantial language support, many JSL learners struggle to succeed in Japanese public schools (Burgess, 2007; Kanno, 2008; Vaipae, 2001). At the same time, sociological research has challenged the long-standing assumption of cultural and linguistic homogeneity in Japanese institutions, including education, demonstrating how dominant social norms are reproduced through schooling (Sugimoto, 2021). Building on this critique, education scholars argue that because compulsory education in Japan does not legally apply to foreign nationals, the school system has been structured primarily around the needs of Japanese citizens rather than immigrant children (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). Consequently, immigrant students' languages, histories, and lived experiences remain largely absent from the national curriculum, while schooling continues to emphasize socialization into dominant norms of "Japaneseness" (Kanno, 2008; Sugimoto, 2021; Tsuneyoshi, 1995; Tsuneyoshi, 2004). More recent research confirms the persistence of these structural conditions, linking ongoing educational disadvantage to limited institutional support for Japanese-language education and uneven access to schooling and lifelong learning opportunities (Shimizu, 2021; Yamada, 2021).

Despite these systemic constraints, research also documents significant local agency and innovation. In municipalities with relatively large immigrant populations—such as Kawasaki and Hamamatsu—local boards of education have, for the past few decades, developed Japanese-language curricula and multicultural educational practices responsive to immigrant and language-minority students (Green, 2014). In some metropolitan areas, school principals, teachers, and parents have collaborated to create more inclusive school environments, including initiatives that actively involve immigrant parents in curriculum development and school decision-making.

Minami Yoshida Elementary School in Yokohama provides a recent example of such efforts. Recognized for its 2024 initiatives promoting multicultural coexistence, the school is presented as a model for multicultural education (Yokohama City Minami Yoshida Elementary School, n.d.). However, model schools tend to be concentrated in urban areas with comparatively large immigrant and language-minority student populations; in this case,

immigrant-background students reportedly constitute a majority of the student body. In contrast, schools in rural or less densely populated regions—where immigrant and language-minority students are fewer in number—often lack the resources, expertise, or institutional support necessary to develop comparable programs (Burgess, 2007). As a result, the implementation of inclusive and linguistically responsive education remains uneven across regions, with local boards of education and individual schools varying widely in capacity, expertise, and available resources (Green, 2014).

These disparities are reflected in national data on school attendance. In 2019, approximately 16% of elementary- and junior high school–aged immigrant children were reported as not attending school, compared with just 0.03% of Japanese nationals in the same age group (Hagiwara & Liu, 2023; Joshi & Tabata, 2021). Non-attendance rates among high-school-aged immigrant youth were estimated to be even higher, indicating increased educational precarity at later stages of schooling (Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2020; Tokunaga, 2018). More recent figures suggest modest improvement: as of 2023, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) reported that 150,695 foreign-national children of school age were registered in Japan, of whom 8,601 (approximately 5.7%) were classified as "non-attending" (MEXT, 2024a; MEXT, 2024b). However, because undocumented children are excluded from official registration systems, these statistics likely underestimate the full extent of educational exclusion faced by immigrant children (Joshi & Tabata, 2021; Yamada, 2021).

Demographic trends further complicate these challenges. Over the past decade, the number of immigrant children living in Japan increased by approximately 25%, alongside growing heterogeneity in national, religious, and linguistic backgrounds (Tokunaga, 2018). This diversification has intensified pressure to establish more inclusive educational structures (Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2020). Yet, there are currently no national diversity training requirements for new teachers, and teacher-training programs across Japan offer few courses focused on working with children from diverse backgrounds (Delakorda Kawashima, 2025).

Because education is not compulsory for foreign nationals and no national policy mandates require teachers to support non-Japanese speakers, responsibility for immigrant education is largely devolved to local and regional governments. This decentralization has resulted in wide disparities in educational provision for JSL learners (King, 2013). In practice, many local governments rely heavily on the volunteer efforts from residents, university faculty,

and students. Although educators widely acknowledge that such reliance is unsustainable, the absence of national coordination has allowed this system to persist.

At the same time, recent scholarship points to important shifts in research perspectives and educational discourse. Haeno (2017) notes a growing emphasis on critically examining school systems and institutional culture, advocating for social-justice-oriented reforms to address intergenerational poverty, and amplify the voices of immigrant youth (Joshi & Tabata, 2021; Kobayashi & Tsuboya, 2020; Tokunaga, 2018, Tokunaga, 2021; Yamada, 2021).

It is within this broader educational and policy context that the SL university course examined in this paper was developed. The course represents a collaborative effort to support immigrant youth in public schools, while also providing university students with opportunities to understand the challenges faced by immigrant children in local educational settings and to consider their own roles in creating pathways toward more equitable education.

Service-Learning

"Service learning is defined as pedagogy, a philosophy and a form of inquiry" (Carrington, 2011, p. 1) combining academic learning and community service with reflection and analysis, ultimately for the purpose of strengthening communities (Pacho, 2015). John Dewey's concepts and ideas about education put forward in *Democracy and Education* (1966) *Experience and Education* (1938) are considered by many to be the pedagogical and philosophical foundation of SL (e.g. Carrington, 2011; Cress et al., 2013; Jacoby, 2015; Pacho, 2015). At the same time, critical SL practitioners look to Paulo Freire's (1970, 2000) transformative pedagogy in which teachers and students study, learn, and create knowledge together while engaging in praxis and reflection, and grounded in critical thinking for the transformation of and betterment of society (Pacho, 2015; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). As pedagogy and program, SL includes four components: "concrete experience, observation of, and reflection on that experience, formation and synthesis of abstract concepts based upon the reflection, and active experimentation that tests the concepts in new situations" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 6).

Furco (1996) defines SL as follows:

> Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service, as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring. To do this, SL programs must have an academic context and be designed so that the service enhances the learning and the learning enhances the service. (p. 5)

As an instructional method, service-learning (SL) connects academic content with community engagement to "narrow the distance between universities and communities" and promote positive social change (d'Arlach et al., 2009, p. 5). SL practitioners and advocates contend that SL programs should critically engage students in community work that challenges oppression and prioritizes action for social justice (e.g., Carrington, 2011; d'Arlach et al., 2009; Hicks Peterson, 2018; Jacoby, 2015).

A defining principle of SL is reciprocity: university instructors and students view communities as equal partners rather than recipients of charity (d'Arlach et al., 2009). Knowledge flows in both directions, as universities and communities learn from and support one another (Jacoby, 2015). In practice, SL requires students not only to participate in community service but also to engage in structured critical reflection. Dewey's (1933) declaration that "we do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience" (p. 78) affirms for SL researchers and practitioners the critical role played by reflection in SL (Cress et al., 2013; Jacoby, 2015). Reflection should be continuous and integrated into the learning process through activities such as journaling, presentations, and peer discussion (Jacoby, 2015) and should be undertaken at all stages of service-learning, before, during and after completion of community service (Toole & Toole, 1995). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model and Toole and Toole's (1995) SL spiral, adapted from Kolb, are commonly used in service-learning curricula to guide reflective processes (Cress et al., 2013). Ultimately, critical self-reflection is central to SL pedagogy and to the assessment of learning outcomes.

Studies have identified multiple benefits of SL participation for students, including the development of critical thinking, leadership, communication skills, empathy, and social responsibility (Jacoby, 2015). Participation in SL has also been associated with reduced stereotyping, increased cultural awareness and cultural recognition, increased intercultural competence, and "an enhanced ability to notice social inequality" (Liu & Lin, 2017, p. 243). Practitioners acknowledge, however, that an "increased awareness of discrimination" does not always result in a decrease in "deficit-oriented thinking" about marginalized

communities (Gordon da Cruz, 2017), nor does the SL experience necessarily involve challenging social inequalities, and may in fact contribute to their reinforcement (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). University SL programs have been criticized for focusing on educational outcomes for their students, while marginalizing community voices and lived experiences (Blouin & Perry, 2009), and for a lack of commitment to social justice and social change, which may reinforce student biases and unequal power dynamics, "providing temporary solutions that do not address oppressive conditions" (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019, p. 44).

Since the 1990s, most U.S. higher education institutions have incorporated SL programs into their missions, making SL a common feature of the undergraduate experience (Carrington, 2011). Ma Hok Ka (2024) notes: "Initially embraced by Western education systems, service-learning has evolved into a versatile approach that aligns with the social, cultural, and political contexts of Asian societies" (p.109). Notably, SL practice and research has been ongoing in Hong Kong universities since the late 2000s (Ma Hok Ka et al., 2019), and Service Learning Malaysia, an initiative of the nation's Ministry of Education established in 2019, has institutionalized SL in universities across Malaysia (Govindaraju, 2025). In Japan, higher education reforms over the past two decades have emphasized active and experiential learning. To meet these national directives, Japanese universities have developed SL programs and curricula that connect universities with surrounding communities and promote learning through service (Fukudome, 2019). In response to the growing emphasis on cultivating global leaders and global citizens, universities in Japan have also expanded both local and international SL opportunities (e.g., Ando et al., 2016; Kikuchi, 2018; Kulnazarova, 2017). Scholars argue that strengthening these efforts is essential for preparing Japanese students for global citizenship (Kikuchi, 2018).

With growing calls in some East Asian and Southeast Asian nations to implement SL programs, conduct SL research, and develop SL pedagogies and rigorous assessment models, it is hoped that the current study may shed some light on a current SL practice at a Japanese university.

Service-Learning and Action Research Methodology

SL and action research (AR) share a commitment to experiential learning and practical engagement, linking theory with real-world contexts. Both emphasize active participation and collaboration with community stakeholders, fostering mutual benefit and social contribution. In SL, students engage directly with communities to address local needs while developing academic and civic skills. Similarly, AR involves iterative cycles of planning,

action, observation, and reflection to collaboratively solve real-life problems (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). In both, the researcher or student is an active co-creator of knowledge rather than a passive observer.

Reflection and reflexivity are central to both SL and AR, though they operate differently. In SL, structured reflection activities—such as journals, discussion sessions, and presentations—enable students to examine social inequalities, their experiences, the effects of their actions, and their personal growth (Kuronuma, 2022). AR emphasizes reflexivity, requiring practitioner- researchers to question assumptions, evaluate interventions, and adapt strategies for pedagogy based on feedback (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). The three principles of AR—reciprocity, reflexivity, and reflection—are integral, interrelated, and operate in tandem along a "continuum of critically reflective practice," allowing the research-practitioner and participants to generate and apply new knowledge (Robertson, 2000, p. 309). Both approaches recognize that learning is socially situated: in SL, through interactions with community members (Akimoto, 2018); and in AR, through collaboration with student participants to co-construct solutions.

Finally, both SL and AR encourage continuous cycles of action and improvement. In SL, students return to community sites to deepen learning, and through iterative reflection, apply new insights to their SL practice. AR's cyclical structure likewise promotes refinement of strategies to ensure that interventions remain effective and relevant (Stringer & Aragón, 2021). Ultimately, SL and AR share a commitment to active learning, social engagement, and reflective practice, highlighting the interconnectedness of action and inquiry in fostering both personal and community development.

Ultimately, AR is a form of qualitative inquiry with significant potential to examine and inform SL practice and other educational initiatives involving immigrant and language-minority children. Tokunaga et al.'s (2022) participatory action research (PAR) study of a collaborative after-school program for immigrant youth at a part-time high school in Tokyo illustrates how AR can function as a tool for both evaluating and affirming programs that aim to create safe and comfortable spaces (*ibasho*) for immigrant students. In contrast to Tokunaga et al.'s PAR study, the AR study at the center of this paper focuses on university students' SL experiences and perspectives rather than those of immigrant children themselves. Despite this limitation, this study seeks to offer insight into how university students and immigrant youth may begin to co-construct *ibasho* together.

Method

Research Design

The present study is qualitative and informed by AR methodology, in which I served as both investigator and active participant–instructor within the SL classroom. AR is practical and oriented toward improving educational practice, which aligned well with the study's goals of refining course content and enhancing students' learning experiences (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Using AR provided a framework to trace students' evolving perceptions as they progressed through the course, analyze their perceptions of the immigrant children they supported, deepen my understanding of their experiences in local schools, and examine how academic readings and other course activities shaped those experiences. This iterative approach also supported ongoing curriculum development. Insights from student discussions and journal entries provided a window into their thinking and SL experience allowing me to make informed adjustments to the course—immediately, and over time.

Service-Learning Course Structure and Organization

The SL curriculum integrates two essential components: service and learning. For the learning component, students attended a minimum of eight three-hour class sessions per semester. Sessions included community-building exercises, small-group discussions of readings, journal writing, cohort-wide discussions, and problem-solving tasks connected to service experiences.

Course readings covered four thematic areas:

1. Theories and practices of service-learning.
2. Research on immigration and experiences of immigrant communities in Japan.
3. Multiculturalism, multilingualism, and second language acquisition (SLA), including Japan-specific studies.
4. Best practices for supporting and mentoring language-minority learners.

Students wrote bi-weekly reflective journals to engage with course concepts and examine their SL experiences. At the start of each semester, students identified the type of service and support activities they wanted to undertake and the educational level at which they preferred to work. They were introduced to Yoshiko Hanbara, coordinator of a university learning support program for children with foreign roots (*gaikoku ni rūtsu o motsu kodomo*), who matched each student with a school where they provided academic or linguistic support.

Dr. Hanbara, a specialist in Japanese language education, a professor, and a colleague in the Faculty of Education graduate program, coordinated requests from schools seeking Japanese language or learning support and matched students accordingly. Her collaboration with local administrators, teachers, and university students is foundational to the sustainability of the SL course. Her responsibilities include scheduling students' SL support activities, connecting them with community partner schools, and matching, whenever possible, language minority children with university students who share their mother tongue. As part of her work, she also educates teachers and principals on the importance of maintaining language-minority children's home languages and respecting their cultural backgrounds (University of Fukui Faculty of Education Integrated Center for Educational Research, n.d.). Once schedules are finalized—typically one session per week—students begin their collaborative support activities with immigrant and language minority youth

Research Participants

Seventeen students enrolled in the spring 2024 course, 11 of whom continued into the fall semester. The cohort included 12 female and five male students, with four 4th-year, seven 3rd-year, and six 2nd-year students. Thirteen were Japanese nationals and four were foreign nationals (see Appendix A), and all provided a range of support services to language-minority children at local public schools (see Appendix B for details on activities and SL sites). Five of the 17 students were selected for inclusion in this study, all of whom provided written informed consent.

Participants were identified through purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

1. Enrollment in at least two semester-long SL courses.
2. Continued support for immigrant children after course completion.
3. Willingness to participate, as indicated by a signed consent form.
4. Capacity for continuous, in-depth self-reflection via journals and discussion.

A final criterion for selection drew on the AR principle of reciprocity, defined here as a long-term, mutually generative relationship between instructor and students in which knowledge is co-created. I deliberately included participants who have taken courses, conducted research, and worked on projects with me, including those I had taught prior to the spring 2024 SL course. Collaborating closely with these participants over several years has provided me with a unique perspective on their growth as learners, mentors, and community supporters, and our sustained collaboration has allowed us to build trust.

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the five participants whose narratives are included: Mariko, Ayaka, Mio, Sara, and Riku. Student writing is presented in a synthesized form where appropriate.

Data Collection: Self-Reflection Journals

Data from self-reflection journals were used to examine SL students' attitudes toward the immigrant youth they supported. Journal assignments accounted for 50% of the course grade. During the spring 2024 semester, students completed six journal assignments, each with prompts provided as PDFs on Google Classroom and submitted via Google Forms. Students were instructed to write at least one paragraph per prompt. Most assignments required responses to one or two mandatory prompts and selection of four additional questions from a list. Journals 2–4 followed this format, while Journals 5 and 6 used Gibbs's (1984) Reflective Cycle to describe and analyze a recent SL interaction: (1) Description, (2) Feelings, (3) Evaluation, (4) Analysis, (5) Conclusion, and (6) Action Plan. Journal 1 addressed students' pre-service expectations. For this study, Journals 2 and 4 (see Appendices C & D) were analyzed, as they most directly addressed the research questions. Sixteen students submitted Journal 2 (14,074 words) and 15 submitted Journal 4 (12,320 words). Excerpts included in the study are drawn from the journals of Mariko, Ayaka, Mio, Sara, and Riku.

Analysis: From Content Analysis to Narratives

In the first stage of analysis, I employed content analysis, as it aligned with AR's continuous cycle of acting, observing, and reflecting (Stringer & Aragón, 2021) and with the reflective cycles embedded in the course. Analysis occurred throughout the spring 2024 semester and continued afterward in multiple stages to support both student and course assessment. This process guided refinements to journal prompts, encouraging connections between SL work and broader systemic issues, such as immigration and education policies affecting the children served. Iterative adjustments included revising or removing readings, modifying journal questions, and integrating selected student excerpts into class discussions. Early analyses focused on course improvement, while subsequent thematic coding emphasized student perspectives and understandings.

I initially quantified and compared patterns in the data (Denscombe, 2021), identifying words and phrases that reflected participants' understanding of core themes developed a priori from course goals and research questions. Using Google Classroom tools, I scanned data from student journals, exported them as PDFs, and organized the information in

spreadsheets for analysis. The summary function in Google Forms enabled responses to be exported without student identifiers, facilitating comparisons across entries and prompts and highlighting which prompts elicited the most in-depth reflection. Journal data were then examined for expressions of empathy and understanding of immigrant children, awareness of challenges faced by language-minority students in public schools, and reflections on cultural values, which were synthesized into narratives for each theme.

Findings

The analysis draws on journal data from five participants collected over the course of one semester. Themes were developed *a priori* based on course goals, research questions, and journal prompts. Across the journals, the terms *struggle*, *trust*, and *reliable* appeared repeatedly, signaling core concerns for participants. Students described both their own struggles and those faced by the children they supported, emphasized the importance of being reliable and consistent in their interactions with teachers and children, and highlighted trust as central to building relationships—particularly in terms of how the children perceived them. These recurring ideas informed the thematic structure of the analysis presented below.

Students' reflections further elaborated these themes by linking them to cultural norms, values, and prior experiences. Participants reflected on the linguistic, cultural, and school-related challenges children faced, while also grappling with their own difficulties in responding effectively within unfamiliar educational contexts. In this process, students consistently returned to questions of reliability and trust as relational responsibilities, revealing a nuanced understanding of cultural difference and the role of sustained, dependable engagement in shaping SL experiences.

Cultural Identity and Cultural Differences

The participants in this study, like others in their SL cohort, were highly diverse. They differed in home language, cultural background, nation of origin, nationality, personality, personal style, and beliefs about education and immigration. In their responses to Journal 2 prompts about identity, they also emphasized different dimensions of their cultural identities, with some noting that identity is fluid and shifts across time and context. Students referenced gender, religion, "being Japanese," native language, educational background (including study abroad), family, socio-economic class, hometown, and region as meaningful aspects of identity. Their recognition of their own identities—including moments when they felt unable to express them—appeared to support their ability to

consider identity from the perspectives of the immigrant children they assisted. Furthermore, a prompt on SL students' ideal learning environments also yielded reflections that tied into SL students' beliefs about the type of support immigrant children might need and desire, and a prompt in Journal 4 about intercultural competence caused some SL participants to reconsider how their cultural identity might make them less responsive to the children's needs. In reflecting on their identities, participants questioned how best to communicate with the children and which aspects of themselves were most relevant in SL settings.

Mio initially struggled with elements of school culture, particularly expectations about how SL supporters should dress. Enjoying feminine and cute fashion, she felt embarrassed when asked to dress less conspicuously. In our class discussions, I shared a story about a similar feeling of embarrassment when conducting research in public junior high schools, when my pierced ears and long earrings were commented on by a participant in my study. Although clothing is only one marker of identity, and perhaps a seemingly unimportant one, feeling rejected based on personal style may result in a recognition of oneself as an outsider. Mio's initial response to this incident allowed her to consider how immigrant children might feel about differences in dress or behavior from the students around them. However, in Journal 4, Mio admitted a strong sense of national identity and stated she did not think she was at the stage of fully accepting cultural differences of all foreign residents. Yet rather than leaving it there, she also continued to explain that it was her responsibility to adapt to different cultural beliefs and practices, noting that only then will she be able to support children in the ways they need. Consistent with this, she wrote in Journal 4 that for SL participants to be effective, "respecting each individual's cultural identity and creating a more comfortable space" were essential, and reconfirmed her desire "to create a space that respects [immigrant children's] identities in future service learning activities."

Drawing on her identity as an English language learner and her study abroad experience, Mariko empathized with the immigrant child she worked with and emphasized the importance of having someone who understands one's background, culture, and language. Reflecting on her own feelings of difference as an exchange student due to linguistic and cultural barriers, Mariko may have initially projected aspects of her personal experience onto the child. However, critically examining these experiences allowed her to more intentionally plan and structure her support sessions around the child's expressed feelings and needs. She consistently created space for the child to speak freely about her home culture and her "favorite things." In Journal 4, Mariko reaffirmed these ideas, explaining

that feeling like a cultural minority while living abroad strengthened her commitment to respecting each individual's cultural identity and background knowledge. She further asserted that "forcing" culture on a child should never be an option. For Riku, his strong identification with family and appreciation for his parents' support provided insight into the significance family relationships may hold for the child he worked with. Reflecting on his own experience of drawing strength from family, he considered that for recent immigrants—who may have limited opportunities to share their lived experiences with others—maintaining and developing first-language use and family relationships may be crucial to their well-being. He further suggested that strong family ties and communication often precede effective communication in the classroom. In Journal 4, Riku reaffirmed his belief that establishing connections with a child outside of the classroom helps build trust, enabling more open communication between service-learning (SL) participants and immigrant children within the classroom setting.

Ayaka, the only participant to explicitly address social class, reflected on how her working-class background fostered resilience and helped her relate to both systemic and personal challenges faced by children from similar circumstances. She believed that this shared class background, which mirrored that of the child she worked with, deepened their connection and enabled her to tailor her support more closely to the child's expressed needs. In Journal 4, Ayaka reiterated her belief in the positive influence of her working-class identity on her interest in working with immigrant children. She also expressed a desire to learn more about the child's identity and cultural background, noting that doing so would allow her to engage more meaningfully, strengthen her support, and further develop her own intercultural competence for working in diverse contexts. In contrast, Sara's reflections revealed a sense of wariness regarding her strong identification with Japanese culture and concern that it might lead her to impose her own values on the child she worked with. She simultaneously questioned the extent of her own understanding of Japanese culture and expressed uncertainty about how to navigate school culture alongside the child.

Although participants' responses in Journals 2 and 4 varied considerably and at times reflected ambivalence about the meanings of culture and interculturalism, the majority of SL participants indicated that reflecting on their own identities and cultural values enabled them to better recognize each child's individuality and cultural background, ultimately fostering closer and more meaningful relationships.

Negotiating Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationship-Building

Participants' journal writing revealed strong self-reflective capacities, an interest in active learning pedagogies, and a genuine desire to learn about, connect with, and meaningfully support immigrant children. Several SL participants described their roles as those of a friend, rather than a teacher, or as a co-learner. At the same time, participants expressed concern and uncertainty regarding the type of support they should provide, their roles and responsibilities, their relationships with the children, and whether their efforts were meaningful to the children. These concerns reflected a sincere commitment to serving immigrant children thoughtfully and responsibly.

Mariko and Sara, who provided support at an elementary school, struggled to balance a teacher's expectation that they focus on helping a child complete homework with their own desire to build trust and foster communication through relationship-building. They were particularly uncertain about their roles when the teacher asked them to perform unanticipated tasks, such as translating announcements and other communications for the child's parents. As a result, Mariko and Sara questioned how to reconcile the role prescribed by the teacher with the role they envisioned for themselves. After observing the SL participants' work, Dr. Hanbara arranged a meeting with them and the child's homeroom teacher. Mariko later described how Dr. Hanbara explained the significance of the SL supporters' activities, reframing them as communication-based learning and emphasizing their linguistic and cognitive benefits for the child. With Dr. Hanbara's support, the teacher was able to reassess these interactions, and Mariko and Sara gained a clearer understanding of the child's needs, which enabled them to design more effective learning activities.

In Journal 4, Mariko reflected on this experience, stating that she felt her SL team and the elementary school teachers had envisioned the SL project differently. She emphasized that her team viewed language activities as essential for building a relationship with the child, whereas teachers appeared more focused on the child's study habits and learning style—an approach that, according to other team members, was often accompanied by teacher criticism. Mariko expressed feeling encouraged by the teacher's response following the meeting with Dr. Hanbara and stated that she came to feel her team's style of support was not wrong. She also described experiencing a new sense of acceptance from the teacher and reaffirmed her belief that supporting the child's ability to communicate her thoughts freely was ultimately most important. Through critical reflection on her experiences and the impact of Dr. Hanbara's intervention, Mariko recognized the tension between institutional

expectations and her team's goals, while articulating a clear commitment to facilitating the child's self-expression. Her reflection highlights a strong desire to build a meaningful bond with the child, an ability to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, and an awareness of the broader educational purposes of SL engagement.

In contrast, Sara—whose service primarily involved attending "regular" classes with the child—admitted that she felt compelled to follow the teacher's lead and focus on helping the child "catch up" academically. She questioned whether she should reprimand the child when the child behaved in ways the teacher disapproved of, even as she expressed a desire to spend more relaxed and comfortable time with the child. Sara, who noted that she felt uncomfortable scolding anyone outside of her family, continued to feel challenged by the differing and sometimes conflicting expectations placed on SL supporters.

Like Sara, Mio also questioned how best to support a child at her SL site who continued to struggle to express herself in Japanese. Teachers at the school where Mio and her team conducted their SL activities requested that the team support the children's Japanese language development, while also granting them the freedom to determine the form this support would take. For Mio, who was particularly interested in second language development, this presented an opportunity to create materials and explore ways to encourage children to use Japanese without fear of making mistakes. At the same time, she worried about whether her team was doing enough and how best to communicate the students' achievements to the teachers. Because she felt a strong sense of responsibility toward the children, Mio at times struggled to understand how the work of SL supporters was perceived or valued within the school context.

Riku similarly expressed a strong sense of responsibility toward the child he worked with, alongside an awareness that his actions at the school were not independent of his position as a university student. He explained that concern over the possibility of negatively impacting the university through miscommunication or inappropriate behavior motivated him to develop a strong sense of self-discipline. Unlike some of his peers, however, Riku did not feel the need to negotiate with teachers regarding the purpose or practice of his support. This was due in part to the school's long-standing involvement with Dr. Hanbara's project, as well as the fact that the youth he worked with clearly communicated the type of support he needed. As a result, Riku focused more on communicating effectively with the immigrant youth than with teachers. This approach allowed him to develop a co-learning

space with the child and led him to recognize that he could learn a great deal from someone younger than himself—an insight he had not previously considered.

Overall, SL participants provided differentiated forms of support to immigrant youth across diverse school sites. Unsurprisingly, they were required to negotiate their service in site-specific ways, whether through interactions with teachers or directly with immigrant youth. These differences in service contexts and school environments meant that SL experiences were not uniform and that each team or individual developed distinct skills and strategies. Importantly, however, all participants navigated these complexities in ways they believed would foster stronger relationships and provide more meaningful support to the immigrant youth with whom they worked.

Empathy for Immigrant Children: Creating Ibasho

Expressions of empathy for immigrant children, particularly regarding their schooling experiences, were among the most prominent themes in the journal data. Tokunaga's (2021) concept of *ibasho*—spaces where immigrant students can communicate their identities and "be themselves"—was both a topic of class discussion and a featured prompt in Journal 2.

Mariko reflected that creating *ibasho* with immigrant children could counter assimilationist pressures and help children who feel different from their peers find comfort and belonging. She demonstrated empathy toward the child she supported, noting the child's worries about differences between her home culture and Japanese culture, and expressing her desire to provide opportunities for the child to express herself freely. Similarly, Mio emphasized that *ibasho* provides a sense of safety, allowing children's identities to be acknowledged and their feelings accepted. She connected this idea to the struggles faced by minority language speakers, such as the inability to communicate needs effectively, and recognized the potential isolation these children might experience. Applying this concept to her SL work, Mio focused on increasing children's talk time at her SL site to encourage sharing of interests and ideas—a step she saw as foundational to creating *ibasho*. Likewise, Sara described *ibasho* as a place of relief for immigrant children and maintained that SL supporters have a responsibility to help create spaces where immigrant children can feel relieved.

Other participants highlighted *ibasho* as a form of belonging linked to mental health and emotional security. Riku's reflection highlighted the importance of physical and emotional

safety. Although his SL activities focused on academic support for a high school entrance exam, he intentionally integrated emotional support to reduce stress and foster comfort. In Journal 2, Ayaka emphasized identity affirmation as central to *ibasho*, particularly for immigrant children with roots in multiple cultures. She suggested that *ibasho* could help immigrant children avoid identity crises and discover new cultural environments, affirming that the creation of comfortable spaces is a core goal of SL work with immigrant children. Ayaka revealed her understanding of *ibasho* as an open, relaxed, safe space that allows immigrant children"to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage while … navigating the complexities of a new cultural environment." She further noted that "by integrating *ibasho* into [her] service-learning activities, [she aimed] to create a supportive environment that fosters emotional well-being for the students." Ayaka's writing emphasized not only empathy with immigrant children, but also a recognition that creating *ibasho* requires intentional action. She understood that providing safe spaces, fostering communication, and affirming identities are active, ongoing processes. Empathy alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by strategies and behaviors that enable children to feel comfortable, seen, heard, and supported.

Although Ayaka's explanation of *ibasho* was perhaps the most developed writing of the SL cohort, all participants continued to insert the term *ibasho* in class discussion throughout the semester and recognized its importance for the development of honest interactions between SL supporters and immigrant children. Moreover, for SL participants co-creating *ibasho* with immigrant children is both a way of activating SL support as well as an outcome of SL support.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest the importance of sustained, experiential engagement in fostering empathy and understanding toward immigrant children in local Japanese schools. The concept of *ibasho*, as described by Tokunaga (2021), highlights the critical need for safe spaces where immigrant students can communicate their identities and "be themselves" without fear of judgment or the pressure to speak *perfect* Japanese. Creating such spaces may be essential to the mental health and well-being of these children. The concept has gained attention in both educational research and policy discourse in Japan (Tanaka, 2021; Tokunaga, 2021; Tokunaga et al., 2022), emphasizing the broader social and institutional relevance of students' reflections in this study.

In the present SL course, participants' engagement with readings on immigrant children's experiences, paired with opportunities for experiential learning and reflective journaling, appeared to deepen their understanding of the challenges these children face in Japanese schools. More importantly, it motivated participants to apply this understanding actively. For example, SL students participated in *ibasho* cafés at local high schools, which provided spaces for Japanese and immigrant students to converse freely in multiple languages. These experiences allowed participants not only to support immigrant children but also to reflect on their own identities, privileges, and roles as allies in educational settings.

Consistent with Homma's (2021) findings, participants demonstrated awareness of the cultural and systemic misalignments between teachers' expectations and the lived realities of immigrant children and their families. Journals and class discussions revealed students' recognition that children's lives extend beyond school walls, encompassing practices such as religious observances that teachers overlooked or misunderstood. This awareness underscores the importance of *ibasho* as a tangible site for empathy, advocacy, and learning. At the same time, participants recognized that creating *ibasho* alone is insufficient; systemic change in school culture—from an assimilationist framework toward multicultural inclusion—is essential to ensure that immigrant children are meaningfully included in all aspects of schooling (Delakorda Kawashima, 2025). SL students, equipped with empathy, reflection, and practical experience, are uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue with educators and contribute to these transformations.

The findings also highlight the ways in which SL students developed sustained relationships with the children and youth they supported. Many participants continued to engage with immigrant and language minority children beyond the course, reflecting a commitment to long-term advocacy. In their journals, students critically assessed local school policies and practices, including the placement of language minority children in special education, limitations on mathematics instruction for minority students, and patterns of classroom exclusion. Even in their first SL course, students demonstrated the ability to identify inequities and consider interventions, illustrating how reflection and experiential learning cultivate both empathy and actionable understanding.

In a broader context, the study indicates that SL can provide a meaningful framework for promoting social justice engagement in higher education, particularly in settings where discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion remain limited. In Japan, as well as in Hong Kong and Malaysia, SL courses that involve sustained interaction with minority youth have

the potential to enhance civic engagement, deepen students' understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity, and encourage advocacy for educational equity (Ma Hok Ka, 2024; Ma Hok Ka et al., 2019).

Limitations

The study is limited in scope to a single city and limited by its focus on SL participants in one semester of a two-to- four semester course. The SL participants in this study did not discontinue their work with immigrant youth, nor did the development of critical insights suddenly stop at the end of the spring semester. A longitudinal study would allow for a more in-depth consideration of students' attitudes toward the communities they serve, their realizations and insights about systemic inequalities in Japanese schooling, the modifications and improvements they make to their ongoing service, and the methods by which university students co-create *ibasho* and a sense of community with immigrant children. Moreover, including the voices of immigrant children, parents and teachers would allow for a better understanding of the impact of SL student impact on stakeholders in the community. Although the study may be considered exploratory, it is hoped that its findings and limitations provide suggestions for future research by SL practitioners in Japan.

Conclusion

The study's findings, though limited, indicate that SL courses can motivate university students to engage meaningfully with foreign residents and to build deeper interpersonal and community connections. Through reflection, dialogue, and direct support, students in the study were able to integrate academic readings with experiential knowledge and begin to identify actionable strategies for improving schooling experiences for immigrant children. Participants' ongoing engagement—continuing to support children and advocate for more inclusive practices after course completion—suggests that SL pedagogy fosters not only empathy but also practical skills for sustained community impact. Although not all service-learning programs lead students to advocacy, this study suggests that long-term engagement is a key condition for such outcomes. Just as students learned that sustained involvement with children is essential for building trust and understanding, extended participation in SL is necessary for developing the interpersonal and critical capacities required to advocate for a more equitable education system for all.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Spring 2024 Service-Learning Course Student Participants

Student	Gender	Year in university	Nationality/ Ethnicity	Previous enrollment in SL	Enrolled in fall semester
A	M	2	Malaysian	No	Yes
B	F	3	Malaysian	No	Yes
C	F	3	Chinese	No	Yes
D	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
E	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
F	M	2	Japanese	No	Yes
G	F	3	Japanese	No	Yes
H	F	4	Japanese	Yes	No
I	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
J	F	3	Japanese	No	No
K	F	4	Japanese	Yes	No
L	M	4	Japanese	Yes	No
M	F	2	Japanese	No	Yes
N	F	3	Japanese	No	No
O	F	3	Brazilian	No	Yes
P	M	3	Japanese	No	Yes
Q	M	4	Japanese	No	No

Note: Gender is coded as M = male, F = female. "SL" refers to service-learning.

Appendix B

Table 2 : Spring 2024 Service-Learning Support Community

Student participants	Community partner school	Youth supported and weekly sessions	Type and place of support
A & Q	H Middle School	1 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after or during other classes; academic subject support; high school entrance exam support
B, E, G, J, K & N	K Elementary School	1 youth; 2 class times, two days per week	In-class shadowing; Japanese language support; pull-out class support; *ibasho*
C	M High School	1 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after classes; mental support; mother tongue support; *ibasho*
D & L	M High School	3 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom during lunch; English language support; *ibasho*
F & P	A High School	Several youth; 1 hour or more/once per week, or sporadically	School classroom after school; one-to-one and group support on student projects; *ibasho*
H, I & M	K Middle School	3 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after school; Japanese language support; play
O	M Middle School	1 youth; 1 hour/once per week	School classroom after school; Japanese language and subject support; *ibasho*

Note: ibasho refers to a supportive space where students can relax, communicate, and "be themselves."

Appendix C

Self-Reflection Journal #2

Directions: *Choose 6 of the following questions or prompts, and write at least 1 paragraph in response. Everyone should respond to #'s 1 & 2, but you are free to choose from among the other questions or prompts*.

1. Describe your first (or first two or three) meeting(s) with the a) teachers, b) students and/or others at your site. Describe it in as much detail as you can. What was discussed? What was decided? Who did what or took on what role/s? What did you do? How long did you spend at the site? What did you learn so far? What questions do you have?

2. What is *ibasho*? What did you learn about the importance of *ibasho* from Tokunaga's reading? How do you think the concept or practice of *ibasho* might connect to your service-learning site or the children/young adults you work with? How might you connect *ibasho* to your service-learning work?

3. Describe your ideal learning environment. Then describe your ideal learning environment for learning a second or foreign language. Are they the same? If yes, explain and describe why this is so. If not, explain how they are different and why. How might understanding your own ideal learning environment help you in this service-learning course? How do you think this course will challenge you this semester?

4. Look at exercise 3.3 about your identity on page 40 (chapter 3) of your service-learning text by Cress et al. (2013). Write and answer the three questions.

5. Explain the ideas of helping, fixing & serving that are discussed in chapter 3 (pp. 44-45) of Cress et al. According to the authors, which of these terms is most appropriate to use in relation to the work you are doing or will do with your community partner/s? Why? Explain.

6. What are the seven C's that are discussed in the reading (chapter 3) by Cress et al. (2013)? Explain them in relation to service-learning work. Why are they important? How do they apply to you and your work or the work you do in this course?

7. How do you currently understand your role at your service-learning site? What are your responsibilities at your service site? What are the underlying issues, and why do they exist? Why does the organization need you to assist with those particular responsibilities?

8. What are you learning at your site about the beneficiaries being served? What are you learning about the organization? What are you learning about the community issues being addressed?

9. What were some positive and negative experiences you had this week? What were the best and worst parts about them? How can you use these experiences to develop who you are as a service-learner and actively engaged citizen?

Appendix D

Self-Reflection Journal #4

Directions: *Choose 6 of the following questions or prompts, and write at least 1 paragraph in response. Everyone should respond to #'s 1 & 2, but you are free to choose from among the other questions or prompts*.

1. What did you understand from Kuwahara's reading about the recent history of immigration in Japan? How might this article support your understanding of the students you work with during your service-learning project? How might it help your understanding of the context in which immigrants live in Japan?

2. Describe the stages that individuals are said to go through on their way to intercultural sensitivity and competence. How do you see yourself relative to these different stages? In other words, what "stage" are you "in" now? Consider this via your service learning activity. (Cress et. al. 2013, chapter 5 pp. 81–85)

3. Which aspects of your cultural identity are most important to you? (e.g. gender, region of the country, socioeconomic class, educational background, other factors) How might your cultural identity/ies affect your interactions at your service learning site?

4. Are you aware of any stereotypes regarding the community/ies you are working with? (Consider teachers, students, parents etc.) Explain. How do stereotypes affect your ability to work at your service learning site? How is this experience influencing your assumptions, opinions, and values?

5. What are some of your interactions like with the teachers, staff (including the principal and vice principal), other supporters, and children at your site? Why do you think these interactions occur the way they do? Are you interacting with a certain population for the first time? How does this influence your thoughts or behavior?

6. If you have supported children or youth in your service-learning in any way since your last self- reflection journal, explain what has worked, and what hasn't worked. Explain and give details of observable outcomes.

7. What activities are you involved in at your service-learning site? Has anything changed at your service-learning site since your last self-reflection journal? Explain.

8. What are some connections that you are making or have already made? How do you envision these connections developing in the near and/or distant future?

9. What are you learning at your site about the children or youth you are working with? What are you learning about the teachers/ principals/organization/school/community?

10. What insight would you share with someone interested in participating in the same type of service as yours?

Author's Biography

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Comfortable at Home, Curious Abroad: Examining Japanese Exceptionalism Among University Students

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Abstract

Japanese exceptionalism – the belief that Japan possesses uniquely positive social and cultural qualities – continues to shape national identity and global engagement. However, few empirical studies have examined how such attitudes influence young people's willingness to study or live abroad. This study addresses that gap by investigating how first-year undergraduate students at a university in Tokyo perceive Japan's uniqueness and how these perceptions relate to their international aspirations. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected through a survey (N = 93) combining Likert-scale and open-ended items. The findings highlight a selective approach to internationalization – valuing short-term exposure but resisting deeper integration – and suggest the need for educational interventions that explicitly address safety perceptions and cultural comfort. This study highlights how national self-perception may affect global mobility and offers some guidance for internationalizing Japanese higher education.

要旨

日本の卓越主義（Japanese exceptionalism）—すなわち、日本には独自に優れた社会的・文化的特質があるとする信念—は、国家アイデンティティおよび国際的な関わり方を形作り続けている。しかし、こうした態度が若者の海外留学や居住への意欲にどのような影響を与えているかを実証的に検討した研究はほとんどない。本研究はこのギャップを埋めることを目的とし、[大学名非公開] の 1 年生を対象に、日本の「独自性」に対する認識とそれが国際的志向にどのように関連しているかを調査した。混合研究法を用い、リッカート尺度項目と自由記述項目を組み合わせた質問票（N = 93）によりデータを収集した。これらの結果から、日本の学生は短期的な国際経験を重視する一方で、長期的な国際的統合には慎重である「選択的国際化」の傾向を示していることが明らかになった。本研究は、国家の自己認識が国際的な移動性に与える影響を明らかにするとともに、日本の高等教育の国際化に向けた指針を提示するものである。

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The term 'exceptionalism' can refer to any widely held belief that an entity or institution, such as a country or a culture, is uniquely good or extraordinary. Unlike ordinary patriotism, which involves affection or pride in one's country, exceptionalism implies a belief in inherent national superiority or moral distinction that sets a nation apart from others. A popular term associated with this is 'American exceptionalism', attributed to the French writer and political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville, who, in comparing the United States with then-powerful countries such as England and France, suggested that America's goodness came from qualities inherent to it (Tocqueville, 1835/1954).

American exceptionalism has been studied extensively, with numerous scholars questioning both its premises and its consequences. Kaun (2007) argues that notions of American exceptionalism embed a predisposition toward inequality and racism. Chivvis (2021), analyzing Niebuhr's writings, observes that such thinking can foster "moral illusions" about the nature of power and purity, obscuring structural inequities. In the realm of foreign policy, Koh (2003) contends that American exceptionalism manifests as a double standard: the United States asserts moral authority while exempting itself from similar scrutiny, thereby alienating allies and undermining its own legitimacy.

Historically, ideas aligned with American exceptionalism can be traced to before the nation's founding, when the country was framed as an "exemplary" experiment destined to model virtue and progress. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his narrative has been reinforced by political rhetoric and popular culture, culminating in what Malone and Khong (2003) describe as the "deification" of the American way of life and its portrayal as "the best system yet devised." Drawing on Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, these beliefs can be understood as part of a socially constructed narrative that binds citizens through shared symbols and myths of destiny. Likewise, Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism explains how such ideals are reproduced in everyday discourse – through language, media, and routine acts of patriotism – normalizing a sense of national superiority. In the Trump era, scholars argue that this discourse has taken a "distorted" and "self-defeating" form (Stewart, 2025), reflecting both the endurance and the volatility of exceptionalist thought.

Japanese exceptionalism is a similar idea that points to the uniqueness of Japan and Japanese culture. In the essay 'Westernisation and Japanese "Exceptionalism": The Oddities of National Histories,' Ryo Yokoe (2012) notes that a sense of excellence inherent to the people of Japan was credited as the driving force behind the nation's rapid

transformation from a feudal archipelago to a modern, developed state and an ascendant global power in the early twentieth century. Following World War II, Japan's "economic miracle" and its dominance in consumer electronics, automobile manufacturing, and shipping – along with its global cultural influence through video games, anime, and manga – have continued to sustain this perception.

Exceptionalism as it is observed can be said to be closely related to *nihonjinron*, the field that focuses on the uniqueness of Japanese national and cultural identity. According to Huang (2017), although *nihonjinron* is a discredited field that has been roundly criticised, it continues to find acceptance in segments of society as well as among politicians. McNally (2015) highlights the influence of Confucianism, suggesting that early modern ideas of national identity, or *kokugaku*, helped shape a form of Japanese exceptionalism stronger than its American counterpart.

To understand how such notions of uniqueness are collectively imagined and reproduced, it is useful to view them through the theoretical lens of Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, which posits that nations are socially constructed through shared narratives, language, and symbols that foster a sense of belonging. Complementing this, Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism helps explain how everyday cultural references – such as media representations, language use, and even humour – can normalize and perpetuate feelings of national superiority without overt ideological intent. These frameworks provide a foundation for understanding how Japanese exceptionalism persists both domestically and internationally, often through ordinary discourse rather than deliberate political propaganda.

Moreover, external representations contribute to the everyday circulation of Japanese exceptionalism. Memes such as "Japan is living in 2050," which proliferate on TikTok and Instagram, frame Japan as a futuristic, problem-free society. These portrayals form part of the media environment in which young people, both within and outside Japan, encounter and internalize narratives of Japanese uniqueness.

Studying abroad can often be a valuable experience for students. Japanese students currently face numerous barriers to studying abroad, including language and cultural challenges and high costs associated with the depreciation of the yen and living expenses in many host countries. Despite these obstacles, the number of Japanese students seeking overseas study opportunities has recovered following the COVID-19 pandemic. While the

United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom remain the most preferred destinations, interest in other Asian countries—such as South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia—has reached an all-time high (Japan Association of Overseas Studies, 2024). However, overall numbers remain low: 70,253 students went abroad in 2024 (Beattie, 2025), significantly lower than the target of 500,000 outbound students that the Japanese government seeks to achieve by 2033 (Tobitate- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.).

Considering this, it becomes important to investigate the attitudes of Japanese students toward studying abroad and to examine whether and how ideas of Japanese exceptionalism influence these attitudes. Much of the existing literature focuses on Japanese students' relative reluctance to study abroad (Oka et al., 2018) or on strategies to motivate them (Burden, 2020). Aspinall (2012) attributes this reluctance to students' risk-averse tendencies, which frame countries outside Japan as unsafe, as well as to the conservative nature of many faculty members, who often lack international experience themselves. Asaoka and Yano (2009) have shown that Japanese students tend to prefer short-term study abroad experiences or visits rather than long-term relocation. However, few studies have explicitly connected ideas of Japanese exceptionalism to this reluctance. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What concerns or anxieties do Japanese university students have about living and studying abroad?

RQ2: To what extent, if at all, are ideas of Japanese exceptionalism a factor in their reluctance to want to go abroad?

Method

Rationale For Mixed Methods Approach

The study of Japanese exceptionalism presents unique methodological challenges that necessitate a mixed-methods approach. Previous research on this phenomenon has been limited by overreliance on either purely quantitative metrics that fail to capture cultural nuances (Befu, 2001) or exclusively qualitative approaches that lack generalizability (Sugimoto, 2014). The complex interplay between national identity, cultural values, and global perspectives cannot be adequately measured through single method approaches alone.

Moreover, the implications of Japanese exceptionalism on practice demand both breadth and depth of understanding. While quantitative data can identify the prevalence and intensity of exceptionalist attitudes among students, qualitative insights are essential to uncover the underlying narratives and discourses that perpetuate these beliefs.

Subedi (2023) highlights that mixed-methods research provides a more holistic understanding of social phenomena by integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data help identify patterns and trends, while qualitative data offer insight into lived experiences and contextual factors that numbers alone may not capture. In addition, the author suggests that combining these approaches enables triangulation and strengthens the validity and reliability of findings.

In this sense, this study therefore attempts to bridge the methodological gap between the two by integrating quantitative measures of students' attitudes with qualitative explorations of their reasoning, creating a more complete picture of how Japanese exceptionalism operates at the undergraduate level.

Design Type and Definition

Specifically, this study utilized a concurrent triangulation mixed methods design (Creswell, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), wherein quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously through a single instrument (survey; see Appendix A), analyzed separately, and then integrated during the interpretation phase. This design was selected to provide complementary perspectives on the same phenomenon, allowing for validation through convergence of findings while also enabling a more comprehensive understanding through the elaboration that qualitative responses provide. Given the exploratory nature of this study, quantitative analyses were limited to descriptive statistics (means, percentages, and frequency distributions). Inferential analyses were not conducted, as the aim was to identify patterns rather than test hypotheses or compare groups.

Participants

Data for both the quantitative and qualitative components of this study were collected from a single source: first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the compulsory academic and communicative English course at a national university in Japan, offering courses in economics, law, social sciences, and commerce. The sample consisted of 93 participants of predominantly Japanese but also mixed Japanese and Chinese nationals between 18 and 21 years of age who completed an online survey administered through Google Forms. The

participants predominantly belonged to economics, social sciences, and commerce departments, with English proficiency at the B1 and B2 levels on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study. To begin with, it was made clear that the survey was not part of coursework and refusal to participate would not affect their academic performance. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no academic incentives or extra credit offered in exchange for completion. This approach ensured that responses were not influenced by external motivations and represented students' genuine perspectives on the topics covered. Participants were informed that the results of the survey, including more detailed answers, may be shared in an academic presentation or paper. They were also assured that their identities would be protected, and the responses provided would only be accessible to the creator of the survey on a password-protected online drive.

Component Approaches

The quantitative component employed a descriptive cross-sectional design using Likert-scale and categorical items to assess the strength and prevalence of exceptionalist attitudes and levels of international engagement among students. The qualitative component used thematic analysis to explore students' lived experiences and their self-reported reasoning behind attitudes toward Japan and toward living or working abroad. A single survey instrument integrated both components, with closed-ended questions generating numerical data and open-ended fields allowing participants to elaborate in either English or Japanese. The full item wording and scale formats are provided in Appendix A.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected in two waves – once in July 2024 and the second time in December 2024. The quantitative data was analyzed through simple descriptive statistics. Inferential statistics were attempted (see Appendix B) but eventually the decision was taken to leave them out of the analysis in order to focus on the exploratory nature of this study.

The qualitative responses collected through Google Forms were exported into a spreadsheet for analysis. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and categories within the data, following the general procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic procedure involved several stages: first, becoming familiar with the dataset through repeated reading; second, generating initial codes that

captured salient ideas; and finally, organizing these codes into broader themes that reflected students' lived experiences and self-reported reasoning regarding Japan and studying or working abroad.

To support the coding process and enhance consistency, an artificial intelligence large language model (LLM), Anthropic's Claude Sonnet 4, was used as an assistive tool to generate preliminary code suggestions and summarize emergent themes (see Appendix B for prompts used) (Anthropic, 2025). The use of the LLM was motivated by its capacity to efficiently identify preliminary semantic patterns across a large volume of open-ended responses and to improve the transparency and reliability of the initial coding stage. Recent work suggests that LLMs can support the initial stages of qualitative coding by identifying tentative patterns that researchers may then refine, provided that the models' limitations and risks of bias are explicitly managed (Ashwin et al., 2023; Chew et al., 2023; Dai et al., 2023); this evidence informed the decision to employ an LLM in an assistive role within the present study. While example paragraphs were generated for structural clarity, the final written text was drafted or refined by the researcher. Moreover, all AI-generated outputs were critically reviewed, refined, and interpreted by the researcher to ensure that the final themes accurately represented participants' perspectives and the contextual nuances of the data. Furthermore, each respondent was anonymized and given a numerical label. Because respondents were given the choice of responding in Japanese, some responses were translated into English using an LLM, with all translations cross-checked for accuracy using DeepL (2025) to ensure semantic accuracy and consistency and to confirm that the meaning, tone, and accuracy of the original responses were preserved. In addition, the same LLM was used for outputting initial drafts of paragraphs in the discussion and contributions sections of this paper (see Appendix B), based on the provided data.

Justification for Integration

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data was essential for several reasons. First, while quantitative measures could identify patterns and the extent of exceptionalist attitudes (e.g., 62.4% holding extremely positive views of Japan), these figures alone cannot explain why students hold these views or how these attitudes influence their willingness to engage internationally. Second, qualitative responses provided context and depth but would be difficult to generalize without the supporting quantitative patterns. The integration of these complementary data types produced a more nuanced understanding of Japanese exceptionalism than either method alone could provide.

Findings

Quantitative Analysis

The survey (see Appendix A) was used to collect responses from 93 first-year undergraduate students at a national university in Japan, but as all questions were optional, all percentages are based only on valid answers.

Demographic and Background Characteristics

Table 1 shows that overall, the sample is overwhelmingly Japanese and largely domestically rooted, with limited long-term exposure to international contexts. This background is relevant for interpreting later attitudes toward living abroad.

Table 1

Participant Background: National Identity, Residence History and International Travel Experience

Identity*	Residence History	Travel Experience
Japanese	Lived in Japan entire life	Have traveled abroad
97.8% (*n*=90)	71% (*n*=66)	60.2% (*n*=56)
Mixed-Japanese	Lived in Japan > 10 years	Too young to remember
1.1% (*n*=1)	25.8% (*n*=24)	4.3% (*n*=4)
Chinese	Lived in Japan < 10 years	Never traveled abroad
1.1% (*n*=1)	3.2% (*n*=3)	35.5% (*n*=33)

*Note** One respondent declined to answer.

Perceptions of Japan

Table 2 suggests a strong baseline positivity towards Japan, with no respondents expressing overly negative views. Overall, 62.4% of the respondents had extremely positive perceptions, 31.2% largely positive and only 6.5% had slightly negative views.

Table 2

Opinions About Japan

Response Option	*n*	%
Best country in the world	18	19.4
One of the best countries (top 5–10)	40	43.0
Great country with a few forgivable flaws	14	15.1
Has positives and negatives like any other	15	16.1
Good but beginning to decline	6	6.5
Not a very good place / dislike living here	0	0

Equally, in terms of their beliefs regarding Japanese uniqueness, Table 3 indicates a moderately strong belief in Japanese uniqueness (mean=3.50). On the other hand, results suggest only a moderate tendency toward superiority beliefs (mean=2.83), less pronounced than beliefs in uniqueness.

Table 3

Beliefs in Japanese Uniqueness and Japanese Superiority (5-point scale, n=92)

	Belief in Japanese Uniqueness		Belief in Japanese Superiority	
SP*	*n*	%	*n*	%
1	4	4.3	21	22.8
2	9	9.8	13	14.1
3	27	29.3	25	27.2
4	41	44.6	27	29.3
5	11	12.0	6	6.5

Note:* SP Scale point, 5 indicates strongest belief

In terms of the reasons for these superiority beliefs, Table 4 shows that students who endorsed superiority tended to cite cultural and social explanations rather than economic, political, or technological ones.

Table 4

Reasons for Perceived Superiority (among those selecting 2–5)

Reason	*n*	%
Politeness and cultural values	51	60.7
Education	38	45.2
Healthy diet	19	22.6

Interest in International Engagement

Interest was measured across three 5-point items (see Appendix A). Table 5 indicates very strong interest in travel (mean=4.31). However, there was a moderate–high willingness to live abroad short-term (mean=3.85), and a notable drop in interest could be observed for stays over five years (mean=3.02). Interest seems to decline as the level of commitment increases, suggesting strong curiosity but weaker long-term mobility intentions.

Table 5

Interest in Travelling or Living Abroad

	Interest in Travelling Abroad (*n*=91)		Interest in Short-Term Living Abroad (<5 years, *n*=89)		Interest in Long-Term Living Abroad (>5 years, *n*=92)	
SP*	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
1	2	2.2	4	4.5	17	18.5
2	9	9.9	14	15.7	24	26.1
3	4	4.4	10	11.2	10	10.9
4	20	22.0	24	27.0	22	23.9
5	56	61.5	37	41.6	19	20.7

Note: SP Scale point, 5 indicates strongest belief

Regarding the reasons why for low interest in travel, Table 6 suggests their concerns predominantly centered on personal safety and lifestyle differences, rather than academic or career factors.

Table 6

Reasons for Low Interest in Travel (rating 3 or below)

Reason	*n*	%
Safety concerns	41	77.4
Being away from family/friends	25	47.2
Lack of cleanliness / weak public infrastructure	24	45.3
Difficulty communicating in foreign languages	21	39.6
Expense	21	39.6
Lack of Japanese food	19	35.8

Future International Intentions

It seems the majority of the respondents remained undecided regarding long-term domestic preference, with only a small minority expressing a firm desire to stay in Japan permanently, as Table 7 shows below.

Table 7

Long-Term Domestic Preference (n=91)

Response	*n*	%
Yes, I never want to live abroad	15	16.5
No, I want to live elsewhere	29	31.9
Not sure	47	51.6

On the other hand, Table 8 indicates that views on domestic-only holidays were nearly evenly split, reflecting mixed attitudes toward international leisure travel.

Table 8

Willingness to Take Only Domestic Holidays (n=91)

Response	*n*	%
Yes	39	42.9
No	38	41.8
Not sure	14	15.4

Qualitative Analysis

Analysis of the 75 open-ended responses regarding perceptions of Japan revealed several recurring themes. Rather than listing comments individually, the following section synthesizes key patterns within each theme while retaining selected verbatim quotations to preserve participants' voices. Note: quotes are reproduced verbatim, including spelling and grammar.

Theme 1: Safety, Politeness, and Cleanliness as Primary Values

The most frequently cited positive attributes of Japan were safety, politeness, and cleanliness. These aspects were typically mentioned first in responses, suggesting their primacy in students' value hierarchies. In other words, it can be said that students view safety, politeness, and cleanliness not simply as positive characteristics, but foundational to national identity and comfort.

Selected quotations:

> "It is clean, safe, beautiful, has great food and culture, and very polite people." (Respondent 9)
>
> "It is because of the safety." (Respondent 8)
>
> "Japan is safe country, but price is high. However Japanese are very polite, so Japan is suitable to live." (Respondent 11)
>
> "It is clean, safe, the food is good and healthy, the people are nice and similar..." (Respondent 21)

Theme 2: Cultural Pride and Food Culture

Cultural elements, particularly food, were prominent in students' positive evaluations of Japan. These responses suggest strong affective connections to cultural practices, traditions, and everyday experiences such as cuisine. References to food often appeared

alongside statements about safety, implying a blended cultural-national identity where lifestyle, heritage, and comfort coexist as sources of pride.

Selected quotations:

> "ご飯美味しいし治安いいし困ることないし最高" [The food is delicious, it's safe, there's nothing to worry about, it's the best] (Respondent 3)
> "There are delicious dishes, beautiful scenery, unique culture." (Respondent 2)
> "Japanese has been developed economically, and Japanese people are very kind and fit me..." (Respondent 32)
> "Japan has a great culture that Japanese people can feel proud of it such as Japanese food, traditional clothes, and imperior [*sic*] family that has history of about 2000 year." (Respondent 37)

Theme 3: Economic and Social Concerns

While positive attributes dominated, many responses revealed awareness of Japan's socioeconomic challenges, against the backdrop of economic stagnation and the weakening yen. These comments reveal an awareness of structural issues that contrast with more superficial narratives of safety and cultural excellence.

Selected quotations:

> "However, due to the decrease of population and birth rate, Japan's economy is unhealthy now. In addition, there is a traditional patriotism and therefore, for women, we can't say that Japan is a definitely great country." (Respondent 40)
> "the economy of Japan is getting weaker and weaker so many people are suffer from low income and high price. Moreover, Japanese government do not support young people and parents enough." (Respondent 6)
> "Although it is pretty peaceful, the dominant narrative that pushes collectivism is somewhat depressing." (Respondent 24)
> "Japan is safe, but this country has still male-feminine, especially political side." (Respondent 53)

Theme 4: Balanced yet Exceptionalist Perspective

Many responses displayed a nuanced understanding of Japan's strengths and weaknesses, yet still framed these within an exceptionalist perspective. Even when listing concerns, students tended to conclude that Japan remained superior or preferable compared to

other countries. This pattern reflects a kind of 'critical exceptionalism,' where national pride coexists with awareness of decline or limitations.

Selected quotations:

> "It is clean, safe, beautiful, historic, has great food and sub-cultures, and very polite and kind people." (Respondent 16)
>
> "In japan [*sic*] it is clean and safe. These aspects directly connect with the quality of life, so we have to think much of them. However, recent economic conditons [*sic*] are not good, so some flaws exists. Overall, Japan is not the best country, but better country than most of other countires [*sic*]." (Respondent 51)
>
> "Although food, safety, medical system, cleanness(sic), and politeness is objectively one of the best in the world, its economic downfall in the last 30 years and the ageing population is highly concerning." (Respondent 17)

Analysis of Desirable Alternative Countries

Students' responses to the open-ended question about desirable countries to live in revealed interesting patterns. In general, preferences clustered around countries perceived as socially stable, culturally homogeneous or those that have effective welfare systems.

Theme 1: Preference for Northern European Welfare States

A substantial number of students named Nordic countries as desirable places to live, often highlighting generous welfare systems, free or low-cost education, and perceived social stability. These comments suggest that when imagining life abroad, students prioritize structural supports that may counterbalance concerns they hold about Japan's long-term socioeconomic trajectory.

Selected quotations:

> "I think Finland would be good because it has a great social welfare system." (Respondent 15)
>
> "I guess Northern European countries such as Denmark or Sweden would be good places to live in. Though the taxes there are very high, the fee of education or medical is free." (Respondent 14)

Theme 2: Cultural Proximity and Ease of Adaptation

Another cluster of responses reflected a desire to live in countries perceived as culturally similar to Japan. Here, cultural familiarity, shared lifestyle norms, and food preferences

appeared to function as markers of comfort and anticipated ease of adaptation. This aligns with earlier findings that students value safety, stability, and predictability in their living environments.

Selected quotations:

> "I think Korea would be a good place to live because the culture is very very similar to Japan, and the food is good." (Respondent 12)
> "I think Taiwan would be a good place as there are customs which is similar to that of Japan, and we can enjoy good cuisines there." (Respondent 13)

Theme 3: Absence of Developing Countries

Notably, very few students mentioned developing countries as viable options. This absence suggests a preference for societies perceived as highly developed, socially orderly, or structurally comparable to Japan. This pattern reinforces a broader tendency toward valuing stability, predictability, and strong public infrastructure—attributes that students consistently associated with Japan itself.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of descriptive quantitative and qualitative data revealed a set of interrelated patterns that illuminate how students navigate international engagement, national identity, and perceptions of Japan. Together, these findings show that attitudes toward studying or living abroad cannot be understood through descriptive statistics alone; rather, they are shaped by underlying value systems and personal evaluations of Japan's social, cultural, and economic context.

1. Conflicting travel desires and safety concerns: Despite high interest in traveling abroad (83.5% rated 4 or 5), safety concerns were the primary barrier (77.4%) for those hesitant about international engagement, highlighting a tension between the two. The qualitative responses consistently emphasized safety as a defining characteristic of Japan, suggesting that the perception of Japan as exceptionally safe creates a barrier to international engagement.

2. Subtle exceptionalism: While only 35.8% of respondents rated Japanese superiority as 4 or 5 (high), the qualitative responses revealed a broader tendency to frame Japan as uniquely positive. Even responses acknowledging Japan's flaws often framed them within a narrative that positioned Japan as "better than most other

countries" or having uniquely positive attributes like safety and cleanliness. This indicates that exceptionalist thinking operates less as overt nationalism and more as an implicit cultural framework through which students evaluate both Japan and the outside world.

3. Short-term versus long-term international engagement: The dramatic drop in interest between short-term (68.6% rated 4 or 5) and long-term (44.6% rated 4 or 5) international living suggests that students view international experience as valuable for temporary growth but not as a viable alternative to the perceived stability at home. This aligns with qualitative comments expressing appreciation for Japanese comfort and convenience.

4. Economic awareness and social critique: Many qualitative responses demonstrated an awareness of Japan's economic challenges and social problems, indicating that exceptionalism coexists with critical thinking. This suggests that exceptionalist attitudes may be more nuanced than simple national superiority beliefs.

These integrated findings suggest that Japanese exceptionalism among these undergraduate students operates as a complex framework that acknowledges flaws while maintaining a belief in Japan's special attributes, particularly regarding safety, cleanliness, and cultural uniqueness. This framework appears to influence their willingness to engage with the world—encouraging tourism but discouraging deep international integration.

Discussion

In response to RQ1 – "What concerns or anxieties do Japanese university students have about living and studying abroad?" – the data revealed that Japanese university students' main concerns regarding living or studying abroad centered on safety, language barriers, and separation from family and friends.

Regarding RQ2 – "To what extent, if at all, are ideas of Japanese exceptionalism a factor in their reluctance to want to go abroad?" – the findings suggest that ideas of Japanese exceptionalism—particularly beliefs about Japan's superior safety, cleanliness, and social order—may contribute to students' reluctance to pursue long-term international engagement.

As outlined in the integrated analysis, four central findings illuminate how beliefs and concerns shape students' attitudes towards international engagement. Finding 1 showed that while most students expressed enthusiasm for international travel, safety concerns were the most prominent barrier to longer-term engagement, suggesting that exceptionalist perceptions of Japan as uniquely safe may function as a subtle deterrent to studying abroad. Finding 2 revealed that exceptionalist attitudes were rarely expressed through overt claims of superiority but through normalized, everyday assumptions of Japan's cultural and moral excellence, aligning with Billig's (1995) notion of banal nationalism. Finding 3 demonstrated that students valued short-term global experiences but preferred to maintain Japan as their base, indicating a pragmatic form of exceptionalism predicated on financial concerns stemming from the weak Japanese yen that promotes temporary mobility without sustained international integration. Finally, Finding 4 indicated that awareness of Japan's social and economic challenges coexisted with national pride, showing that exceptionalism can persist even alongside critical reflection. Together, these findings shed light on the idea that exceptionalism functions as an adaptable, everyday framework rather than a rigid ideology.

Contributions

The findings of this study make a few contributions to the existing literature. Echoing Finding 1, the strong emphasis on safety and order as defining characteristics of Japan is consistent with previous studies on Japanese national identity (McNally, 2015), as is the tendency to view Japanese cultural practices as uniquely positive. In line with Finding 2, they confirm prior research on the persistence of Japanese exceptionalism (Befu, 2001; Sugimoto, 2014), while elaborating on how these attitudes manifest among contemporary university students. Similarly, as observed in Finding 3, the preference for short-term rather than long-term international engagement echoes findings from studies on Japanese study abroad programs (Asaoka & Yano, 2009). The study also extends prior research by revealing the specific domains (safety, food, cleanliness) through which exceptionalism is primarily expressed among this population.

However, a few findings diverge from or add nuance to previous research. First, while prior studies have mentioned Japanese students' concerns about safety abroad (Aspinall, 2012), these findings reinforce specific concerns about safety and cultural comfort that could potentially be addressed. Second, the findings reveal sophisticated critical awareness of Japan's economic and social challenges, indicating that exceptionalism coexists with rather than precludes critical thinking. Third, the strong preference for Nordic countries as

alternative living destinations differs slightly from previous research that has emphasized North America, Australia or Asia as primary points of interest, while continuing to align with existing studies on "lifestyle migration", in which people move between industrialized countries in search of a better quality of life (O'Reilly & Benson, 2009). Fourth, aligning with recent data that reveals a growing preference for migration to Asian countries such as Taiwan and Korea (Japan Association of Overseas Studies, 2024), cultural proximity emerged as a minor pattern.

All in all, these contributions move beyond abstract discussions of Japanese cultural uniqueness (*nihonjinron* and *kokugaku*) and suggest how these ideas manifest as concrete attitudes among students in this sample who, perhaps unknowingly, express forms of cultural exceptionalism. By explicitly linking these patterns to Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities - a framework that continues to be relevant in recent scholarship on nationhood and globalization (Tryandafillidou, 2025) - the study suggests that collective national narratives continue to shape individual perceptions of global engagement even within highly educated populations. By examining these attitudes in the context of higher education, this study may help identify potential intervention points for internationalizing Japanese university curricula in ways that effectively address existing exceptionalist frameworks.

Alternative Explanations

Several alternative explanations for these findings merit consideration. First, the predominantly positive views of Japan and hesitations about long-term international living might reflect the natural home-country preference and comfort that most people feel with their native environment rather than specific Japanese exceptionalism. This interpretation could be supported by the answers of respondents who explicitly acknowledged they might feel similarly about any country they grew up in. Second, concerns about crime and safety abroad may reflect media representations rather than exceptionalist thinking. Third, the strong interest in travel coupled with low interest in long-term relocation might reflect more real concerns related to diet, way of living, environmental pollution, and language barriers.

Strengths and Limitations

A few strengths of this research can be highlighted. The mixed-methods approach allowed for both measurement of attitude prevalence and exploration of underlying reasoning, providing a more complete picture than either method alone could offer. The anonymous survey format likely encouraged honest responses on potentially sensitive topics regarding

national attitudes. The sample, while limited to one university, included students from various departments such as law, economics, social sciences, and commerce, potentially providing some diversity of academic perspectives. The inclusion of both Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses created multiple avenues for students to express their views, allowing for methodological triangulation.

In the same way, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to students at a single university, potentially limiting generalizability to the broader Japanese youth population. Their differing socioeconomic backgrounds and academic environment could contribute to stronger global awareness and varying attitudes toward Japan compared to students in other contexts. Second, most open-ended responses were written in English, sometimes in brief or grammatically limited forms, which may have constrained the expression of nuance or affected interpretation. It may also have created a response bias favouring students with stronger English skills or more international inclinations. Indeed, as students in a compulsory English course with B1 and B2 proficiency, which would correspond to intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, respondents may have had higher than average interest in or aptitude for international engagement. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits our ability to determine whether these attitudes are stable or evolving as students progress through university. Fourth, the study's context – conducted in the post-COVID period – likely influenced perceptions of safety, travel, and risk, making the findings time-sensitive. These limitations suggest that while the patterns identified are informative, they should be interpreted within the specific linguistic, institutional, and temporal context of the study.

Additionally, while the sample included one mixed-Japanese/Chinese participant and one Chinese participant, these numbers were too small to allow for any meaningful comparative analysis. The analysis also did not control for prior international experience, which might be an important mediating factor.

Last but not least, all of these considerations are underscored by a crucial limitation of this research: the use of *descriptive* statistics (as opposed to *inferential* statistics) and the inherent lack of generalizability of qualitative results. Since the statistical analysis in this paper concentrated on descriptive elements, inferring the extent by which these results may also apply to the larger population is a nor possible. This, compounded by the fact that qualitative analysis is not meant to shed light on anything other than the particular

sample studied, suggests that caution must be taken in generalizing the findings and it also points towards possible future research directions.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations emerged during this research. First, investigating cultural exceptionalism requires careful attention to avoid reinforcing nationalist narratives while still accurately representing participants' views. This was addressed by maintaining a balance between reporting exceptionalist attitudes and contextualizing them within critical frameworks on nationalism and identity – particularly Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities and Billig's (1995) theory of banal nationalism – which emphasize how national belonging and superiority are reproduced through everyday discourse. These frameworks provided an interpretive lens that allowed the researchers to acknowledge participants' perspectives while critically examining the sociocultural processes underlying exceptionalist beliefs. Second, as the survey was conducted within an English course, care was taken to ensure students understood participation would not affect their academic standing, although the power differential between instructor and students cannot be entirely eliminated.

Implications for Future Research, Policy, and Practice

Research Implications

One clear avenue for future research is to conduct inferential statistics-based research that could illuminate trends in exceptionalist attitudes in the larger population. For instance, longitudinal studies tracking how these attitudes evolve throughout university education would provide insight into the impact of higher education on cultural worldviews. Comparative studies across different types of Japanese universities and international institutions would help contextualize these findings. Research examining the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions in addressing exceptionalist frameworks would move from description to intervention. While this study focused on Japanese students, future research could incorporate comparative analyses with students from other East Asian contexts such as South Korea or China, where cultural and educational factors related to national identity may similarly influence international engagement. Comparative work would help clarify whether the patterns observed here are unique to Japan or instead reflect broader regional dynamics in perceptions of global mobility. Additionally, studies incorporating social network analysis might illuminate how peer groups and media consumption patterns influence exceptionalist attitudes.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, these findings suggest several considerations. First, internationalization policies in Japanese higher education might benefit from directly addressing safety concerns and cultural barriers rather than simply encouraging more international enrollment or exchange. Second, policies promoting international experience might focus on quality and depth of engagement rather than quantity of international students or programs. Third, university curriculum policies might integrate more critical comparative perspectives on issues like safety, cleanliness, and food culture that emerged as domains of exceptionalist thinking.

Practical Implications

For educational practice, several implications emerge. First, educators might develop specific instructional units addressing perceptions of Japanese uniqueness in domains like safety and cleanliness, introducing comparative data and critical frameworks to help students contextualize these beliefs from a global standpoint. This could include classroom activities where students analyze international statistics on safety, quality of life, and health outcomes to compare their assumptions with evidence.

Second, study abroad programs could incorporate pre-departure components that explicitly address safety concerns and cultural adjustment expectations. Workshops could use case studies of Japanese students who have studied abroad to provide peer-based reassurance and realistic perspectives.

Third, classroom activities might leverage students' strong interest in international travel as an entry point for deeper cross-cultural learning. For example, assignments could involve reflective journals comparing travel motivations with broader social narratives about Japan’s global image.

Fourth, creating opportunities for meaningful interaction with international students on campus could help challenge assumptions about cultural uniqueness in a supportive environment. Facilitated intercultural dialogue sessions, collaborative projects, and exchange cafés are evidence-based strategies shown to enhance intercultural empathy and reduce ethnocentric attitudes (Deardorff, 2006).

Ultimately, the findings of this study have the potential to provide educators with a certain degree of informed understanding of how exceptionalist beliefs intersect with student

motivation and anxiety toward global engagement. By addressing these patterns directly, universities could design more culturally responsive curricula that foster reflective, confident, and globally minded graduates.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding its previously mentioned limitations, this study sought to present an exploration of how ideas of Japanese exceptionalism intersect with university students' attitudes toward studying and living abroad. To recapitulate, the findings suggest that while many students might have expressed openness toward international travel, fewer seem to envision long-term engagement abroad. This may reflect a nuanced tension between curiosity about the outside world and comfort with Japan's perceived safety, cleanliness, and cultural cohesion. In summary, these attitudes appear to be shaped not merely by individual risk aversion but by broader cultural narratives that tend to normalize Japan's uniqueness and superiority in subtle, everyday ways – aligning with what Billig (1995) terms "banal nationalism."

By linking these findings to Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, this study highlights how collective identities and national myths may continue to influence individual decision-making even in an era of globalization and digital interconnectedness. An understanding of these dynamics is essential in sociocultural research, as it may shed light on how nationalism and self-perception might affect mobility and intercultural engagement.

The implications extend beyond higher education. Policymakers and educators alike must recognize that internationalization is not solely a logistical or economic challenge but a cultural and ideological one. Programs that seek to globalize education could benefit from addressing underlying beliefs about national uniqueness, safety, and social order, framing them as topics for critical reflection rather than unexamined truths.

Finally, by addressing Japanese exceptionalism not as a misconception but as a complex cultural framework requiring thoughtful engagement, educators can help students develop a more reflexive understanding of identity and difference. Such awareness can prepare them for meaningful participation in an interconnected world, one in which appreciation of one's heritage coexists with openness to other ways of living and learning.

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Appendix A

Instrument

[University Name Redacted]: Student attitudes towards travelling and working abroad

This is a short survey to ascertain the attitudes students of [university name redacted] have towards their own country and how it compares to the rest of the world.

Although the questions are in English, long-form answers may be provided in English or Japanese. It is absolutely fine to use a mix of both languages, especially for individual words, technical terms, and phrases.

Your identity and data shall be protected and not disclosed to anyone. Results of the survey, including more detailed answers, may be shared in a presentation or academic paper with the student's identity hidden.

The data that you provide shall only be stored on Google Drive, which can only be accessed by a password known to the creator of this survey. This shall never be leaked or shared in any other context other than in an academic context, with no mention of the identities of individual students. If this is acceptable to you, I would be most pleased if you could fill this form - it shouldn't take more than 5 to 10 minutes. **This is completely optional, so if you are not okay with the contents or any conditions pertaining to the survey, you are free to leave it blank and avoid filling it in.**

1. What is your nationality?
    - Japanese
    - Mixed-Japanese
    - Other

2. How long have you lived in Japan?
    - My whole life
    - More than 10 years
    - Fewer than 10 years

3. Have you ever travelled outside Japan?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Once or more, but I was very young, so I have no memory of it.

4. What is your objective opinion on Japan as a country? Select the one that is closest to how you truly feel.
   Provide detailed reasons for your answer below:
   E.g. if you picked 'It is a great country with a few flaws, which can be forgiven', you can write your answer:
   1. It is clean, safe, beautiful, has great food and culture, and very polite people.
   2. Because of the devaluing of the yen and low salaries, along with a strict work culture, life can be very difficult here. Many people are also very lonely.
   3. However, overall, I think it is still one of the best countries to live in."
   (Long-answer text)

5. To what extent do you believe that Japan and Japanese people are unique?

Don't believe this at all	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly believe this

6. To what extent do you believe that Japanese people are, in general, better than/superior to other nationalities?

No different than others	1	2	3	4	5	Definitely and significantly superior to others

7. If your answer to the previous question was between 2 and 5, what do you think the reason might be? Tick all that apply.
   ☐ I answered '1' to the previous question so I don't need to answer this.
   ☐ Japanese cultural values (such as politeness)
   ☐ Education
   ☐ Healthy diet
   ☐ Other:

   Other than Japan, what other country would you say is desirable for you as a place to live in? Could you also provide a short reason?
   E.g.: I think Canada would be a good place to live as it has natural beauty, diversity, and good work-life balance.
   (If there is no such country, just write 'None')
   (Long-answer text)

8. How interested are you in travelling abroad?

Not at all interested	1	2	3	4	5	Very interested

9. How interested are you in living abroad short-term (less than 5 years)?

Not at all interested	1	2	3	4	5	Very interested

10. How interested are you in living abroad long-term (more than 5 years)?

Not at all interested	1	2	3	4	5	Very interested

11. If your answer for any of the previous three questions was 3 or less, what would your reasons be? Tick all that apply.

☐ Too expensive
☐ Difficulty communicating in English or other languages
☐ Safety -- specifically related to crime
☐ Lack of cleanliness and substandard public infrastructure
☐ Discomfort with behaviour and manners that are not common in Japan
☐ Exposure to diseases and worrying about falling ill
☐ Being away from family and friends
☐ Lack of availability of authentic Japanese food
☐ Lower quality of food
☐ Just not interested in visiting any place outside Japan
☐ Other:

12. Would you be happy to never leave Japan to live elsewhere, short-term or long-term?
    - ∘ Yes, I never want to live outside Japan for any length of time.
    - ∘ No, I absolutely would like to live elsewhere.
    - ∘ Not sure yet.

13. Would you be okay to only or mostly take domestic holidays (within Japan) for the rest of your life?
    - ∘ Yes, I would be okay with that.
    - ∘ No, I would not be okay with that.
    - ∘ Not sure.

14. If required, would you be okay with the creator of this survey contacting you for follow-up questions?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Maybe

15. If your answer to the previous question was 'Yes' or 'Maybe' please write down your preferred email address below.
    (Short-answer text)

Note: This instrument, as it is being shown here, is an adaptation of the original survey which was conducted through Google Forms.

Appendix B

Prompts Used on Claude Sonnet 4 for Data Analysis and Collection

1. Prompt used to analyze findings

For the 'Findings' section of this paper, please analyze the uploaded csv and ensure the following criteria are met:
• Describe research findings (e.g., themes, categories, narratives) and the meaning and understandings that the researcher has derived from the data analysis.
• Demonstrate the analytic process of reaching findings (e.g., quotes, excerpts of data).
• Present research findings in a way that is compatible with the study design.
• Present synthesizing illustrations (e.g., diagrams, tables, models), if useful in organizing and conveying findings. Photographs or links to videos can be used.
Provide information detailing the statistical and data-analytic methods used, including
* – missing data
  * › frequency or percentages of missing data
  * › empirical evidence and/or theoretical arguments for the causes of data that are missing—for example, missing completely at random (MCAR), missing at random (MAR), or missing not at random (MNAR)
  * › methods actually used for addressing missing data, if any
* – descriptions of each primary and secondary outcome, including the total sample and each subgroup, that includes the number of cases, cell means, standard deviations, and other measures that characterize the data used
* – inferential statistics, including
  * › results of all inferential tests conducted, including exact *p *values if null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) methods were used, and reporting the minimally sufficient set of statistics (e.g., *df*s, mean square [*MS*] effect, *MS *error) needed to construct the tests
  * › effect-size estimates and confidence intervals on estimates that correspond to each inferential test conducted, when possible
  * › clear differentiation between primary hypotheses and their tests–estimates, secondary hypotheses and their tests–estimates, and exploratory hypotheses and their test–estimates
Adhering to all of this, please draft the paragraphs.

2. Prompt used to summarize emergent themes

For the Discussions section, draft several paragraphs under different subheads corresponding to the following criteria:
• Describe the central contributions and their significance in advancing disciplinary understandings.
• Describe the types of contributions made by findings (e.g., challenging, elaborating on, and supporting prior research or theory in the literature describing the relevance) and how findings can be best utilized.
• Identify similarities and differences from prior theories and research findings.
• Reflect on any alternative explanations of the findings.
• Identify the study's strengths and limitations (e.g., consider how the quality, source, or types of the data or the analytic processes might support or weaken its methodological integrity).
• Describe the limits of the scope of transferability (e.g., what should readers bear in mind when using findings across contexts).
• Revisit any ethical dilemmas or challenges that were encountered, and provide related suggestions for future researchers.
• Consider the implications for future research, policy, or practice.
Wherever an academic reference is either required or you have one but you need me to check it, please write 'REFERENCE CHECK' next to it so I can flag and check it.

Author's Biography

Suprateek Chatterjee is a Japan-based educator teaching a communicative English course at a national university and computer science and digital literacy in the international program of a junior high school in Tokyo. His research interests include global citizenship, international outlooks, media literacy, and the role of AI in education. Prior to entering academia, he worked as a culture journalist in India, writing on cinema, music, and popular culture. Correspondence should be sent to: *suprateek.chatterjee@britishcouncil.org*

Japanese University EFL Learners' Needs for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC): A Cross-National Comparison

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Abstract

This study examined Japanese university participants' achievement of Byram (2021)'s intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in comparison to English learners from other countries. This study conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses of data from a 12-week virtual exchange project in which 334 English learners from six countries (Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, Taiwan, Ukraine, and Japan) shared 5,558 messages on diverse topics. From the results, the following key areas emerged: Japanese students displayed a weaker attitude toward intercultural communication, partly due to their lower fluency. While they seemed to acquire some knowledge of the process of interaction, specifically the formation of stereotypes and prejudices, their grasp of other cultures remained insufficient. ICC skills, the skills of interpreting and relating, and the skills of discovery and interaction, were also attested. It has become clear that ICC should be integrated into the curriculum, taking into account the characteristics of Japanese learners.

要旨

本研究では日本人大学生英語学習者による Byram（2021）の相互文化的コミュニケーション能力（ICC）の達成度を他国の英語学習者との比較から明らかにした。研究では 6 カ国（ブラジル、インドネシア、韓国、台湾、ウクライナ、日本）334 名の英語学習者が参加した 12 週間の仮想交流プロジェクトに投稿された総数 5,558 のメッセージを量的、質的に分析した。その結果、以下のことがらが明らかになった： 流暢さの低さも起因して、日本人大学生は相互文化的コミュニケーションへの好奇心や関心がかなり低い。ステレオタイプや偏見の形成に関連する対話プロセスの知識はある程度習得していたが、他者の文化についての知識は不十分であった。また、解釈や関連づけ、発見や対話のスキルも裏付けられた。日本人学習者の特性に配慮しつつ ICC をカリキュラム内に定着させる必要性が明らかになった。

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Multiculturalism, which advocates coexistence among different ethnic groups, has spread as an ideology respecting cultural diversity since the 1980s. However, since the 21st century, numerous critical studies have pointed out its limitations in recognizing and respecting cultural differences rather than fostering dialogue and mutual transformation between groups (Council of Europe, 2018; Stokke & Lybæk, 2018). These criticisms are closely connected to Michael Byram's theory of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which explicitly centers dialogue, reflexivity, and critical cultural awareness as corrective measures to such limitations.

Byram (1997) referred to people who possess critical cultural awareness, i.e., the people who seek some transformation in society by critically reflecting on themselves through dialogical engagement, as *sojourners*, saying "it is the sojourner who produces effects on society which *challenge* its unquestioned and unconscious beliefs, behaviors and meaning, and whose own beliefs, behaviors and meanings are in turn challenged and expected to *change*" (p. 1, italics added by author). Byram contrasted sojourners with *tourists*. While sojourners hope to change society, tourists hope that what they saw and experienced during their journey to a different society will remain unchanged. Council of Europe (2018) stated that "In culturally diverse societies, intercultural dialogue is thus crucial for ensuring that all citizens are equally able to participate in public discussion and decision making. Democracy and intercultural dialogue are complementary in culturally diverse societies" (p. 24). They recognized the significance of intercultural dialogue for the development of democracy. *Dialogue* and *change* are the key concepts of ICC.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) strategic plan (2002) seemed to lack these features of ICC. It defined the reason to cultivate *Japanese with English abilities* as follows:

> With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation. (Chapter 2, Section 4-1 (3))

Byram (2008) criticized that MEXT's aims "are to give the skills they need for economic purposes – investment in human capital – but not an international perspective that overcomes an underlying isolationism" (p. 29). Byram thus pointed out that English language teaching in Japan aims to cultivate human resources that support Japan's

economic prosperity, while maintaining the isolationism intact. Since MEXT's statement did not address dialogue or change, it lacked an ICC perspective. This might imply that the concept of ICC has not been well-developed in Japan. Then, how should foreign language instructors in Japan foster it?

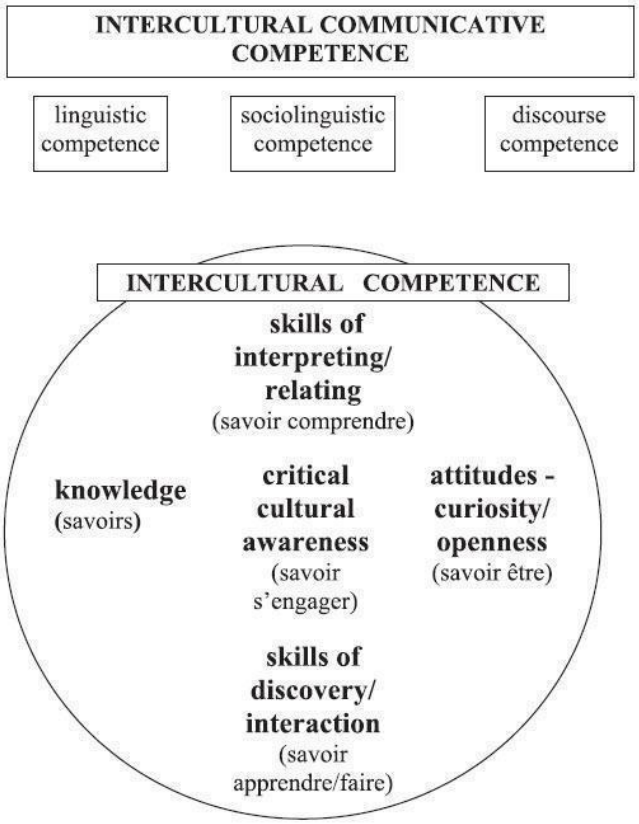
Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram (2021)'s ICC framework is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Intercultural Competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence



Note. From *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence: Revisited* (p. 62), by M. Byram, 2021, Multilingual Matters.

The three language competences, i.e., *linguistic competence*, *socio-linguistic competence*, and *discourse competence*, are positioned above *intercultural competence*. This underscores the significance of these two concepts being interwoven to compose ICC. Byram said, "there are connections between language competences and the competences

that make up intercultural competence, and the introduction of language competences changes intercultural competence into ICC" (2021, p. 61).
The three language competences originated from van Ek (1986)'s communicative ability. Byram made revisions to each of them. First, he removed the reference to "native speakers" from the definition of linguistic competence, considering the widespread use of English as a lingua franca among non-native speakers. Second, he shifted the use of the term "meaning" from linguistic competence to sociolinguistic competence. Every meaning should be negotiated socially with the interlocutor, he maintained. Third, he extended discourse competence to include the ability to use, discover, and negotiate strategies for texts that are inherently culturally intertwined.

All five aspects of intercultural competence in Figure 1, encompass both one's own culture and that of others. Intercultural speakers who engage in intercultural communication and interaction should possess *attitudes* of curiosity and openness, as well as a readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment. They possess two types of *knowledge*: knowledge about social groups and their cultures in one's own country, and similar knowledge of the interlocutor's country (hereafter, Knowledge 1), and knowledge of interaction processes at both individual and societal levels (hereafter, Knowledge 2). The *skill of interpreting and relating* is the ability, or the procedural skill, to understand a specific document or behavior from a different culture, using acquired knowledge and linking it to one's own.

The *skills of discovery and interaction* are also procedural. They can enhance and improve one's understanding of others and enable a response to an individual with a unique mode of interaction. These skills are best developed in a foreign context, where they have almost no prior knowledge of their interlocutors or very little. They are the ability to comprehend inexplicable aspects of the other person's language, beliefs, values, behavior, etc., and to acquire particular knowledge. The discovery process is challenging due to time constraints and significant differences in mutual perceptions and attitudes. The skill of interaction can handle these limitations with specific interlocutors in particular conditions through dialogue. Byram's idea of sociolinguistic meaning creation is embodied in these skills.

The fifth competence, *critical cultural awareness,* can be fostered within a larger educational framework. Byram (2021) proposed "I shall argue for the integration of teaching for intercultural communication within a philosophy of *political education* and the development of learners' critical cultural awareness, with respect to their own country and others" (p. 44, italics added by author). Here, the concept of political education

encompasses cognitive, evaluative, and action orientations. It can be achieved collaboratively across all general education subjects, not confined to foreign language instruction within an institution. This is the reason critical cultural awareness is positioned at the center of intercultural competence in Figure 1.

Criterion-Oriented vs. Norm-Oriented

Assessment can be divided into two main types: criterion-oriented and norm-oriented. Criterion-oriented assessment measures learners' performance against a fixed learning objective. On the other hand, norm-oriented assessment shows how an individual or a particular learner group performs relative to peers or groups. Several studies have highlighted the importance of integrating both types of assessments, as they offer distinct yet complementary information about learners (Renaissance, 2018; Sternberg et al., 2022). Since Byram's five aspects of intercultural competence are criterion-oriented, integrating norm-oriented assessment with each aspect will provide pedagogical benefits for intercultural exchange. For example, when a specific learner group shows unique characteristics in their ICC attainment compared to other groups, instructors can take measures tailored to them in advance of the actual interaction.

Virtual Exchange

Byram (2021) outlined the detailed objectives of each aspect of intercultural competence in Chapter 3. They are theoretical in nature and ought to be adjusted to the pedagogical context. Newton (2016) outlined some practical language course design guidelines for instructors to help learners attain intercultural competences. Some of these include placing language learning in real communication events, genres, and tasks, having learners consider their own cultures, encouraging them to apply concepts learned outside of the classroom, and letting them compare a variety of experiences, both of their own and those of others, and reflecting on their feelings and judgments. However, these suggestions are challenging to implement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) circumstances where intercultural meetings are restricted.

Virtual exchange (VE) has been providing solutions to this issue. Students can interact with people online in English, regardless of borders. Many endeavors have sought to incorporate VE into their regular foreign language classes and proved its effectiveness (Hagley, 2020). O'Dowd (2021) further argued that proponents of VE wish to extend the idea of online intercultural interaction beyond the field of foreign language education and incorporate cross-disciplinary elements into online intercultural exchanges. Project-based

learning that specifies concrete goals to achieve is more effective for cross-disciplinarity in VE. Collaborative online international learning (COIL) is one such approach. Successful COIL implementation requires organizational preparation, such as a dedicated administrative office and faculty training (Rubin, 2017). Although the term "virtual" is employed, VE practitioners do not perceive significant limitations in their activities.

O'Dowd (2021) made a systematic literature review of the VE and highlighted gains in intercultural understanding. Chu et al. (2024), Nguyen et al. (2024), and Stambouli et al. (2025) investigated how learners participating in a VE project achieved aspects of ICC and highlighted its positive effects. However, these studies did not provide a clear picture of Japanese learners' characteristics in intercultural communication, even though some Japanese participants were involved in the VE project under study.

ICC and Japanese Learners

Hagley (2020) is a leading researcher who has long examined the participation of Japanese university English learners in VE projects. He launched IVEProject (intercultural virtual exchange project) in 2004 and, from 2015, expanded it into a large-scale service with a grant from MEXT Japan (Hagley & Green, 2022). The project contributed to Japanese students' intercultural sensitivity and understanding of both their own culture and their partners' cultures. On the other hand, the Japanese often lacked confidence and fluency in actual communication due to limited practical communication experience (Hagely, 2020; Roarty & Hagley, 2021).

Matsumoto (2012) and Inaba (2023) also focused on Japanese learners. Matsumoto (2012) reported the compilation of 29 Can-Do lists for intercultural competence and related critical thinking skills for Japanese learners, drawing on insights from Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA) by European Center for Modern Languages (2010). In her article, she also examined Japanese learners' ICC using her Can-Do lists and investigated how learners reflected on their multicultural and multilingual communication abilities. Inaba (2023) adapted and supplemented parts of the Can-Do list developed by Matsumoto (2012, 2013) to investigate Japanese learners' ICC attitudes and ICC skills. Both studies investigated Japanese learners' ICC through self-reflection on the Can-Do list items. The Can-Do lists used in their research carry inherent value. However, the abstract and inclusive nature allows wide and subjective interpretation. To make the Can-Do list assessment more consistent, it is necessary to collect and analyze actual learner products, such as writing, recordings, or projects.

Kikuchi et al. (2015) conducted a comparative study of international exchange needs (IEN) among college students in Japan and South Korea using exploratory factor analysis and a t-test. They revealed that Japanese students have a statistically significant lower IEN than Korean students, which could mean less curiosity and interest in intercultural communication. They suggested two pedagogical approaches for Japanese learners. Both are concerned with intercultural communication: making English teaching/learning more practical and useful by increasing opportunities to encounter foreign people in English, and encouraging autonomous discovery learning grounded in intercultural dialogue.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the needs of Japanese university learners' ICC through a cross-national comparison of their written products in an international VE project both quantitatively and qualitatively. Byram (2021) provided a comprehensive list of achievement goals for each of the five aspects of ICC. However, this study does not seek to evaluate participants' substantive achievement of ICC. Rather, it aims to identify fundamental paths that Japanese university students should follow to foster ICC by restricting research analysis methods in four ways.

First, although ICC comprises intercultural competence and language competence, as shown in Figure 1, the latter, language competence, is excluded from the study. Byram's language competence must be analyzed across three domains, i.e., linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence, with the premise of cultural differences among interlocutors and the use of language as a lingua franca. Analysis cannot be conducted without sufficient preparation and deep consideration. Therefore, this paper will focus on analyzing intercultural competence, leaving the analysis of language competence for future research. Second, this study employs only written language data. Since Byram's ICC owes much to face-to-face real-time spoken interaction, an analysis of VE's written language, produced in asynchronous written interaction, cannot, in theory, provide ideal insight. The third restriction concerns Knowledge 2 of ICC. The concept of Knowledge 2 requires concentrated and patient dialogue among people. Since written interaction does not encourage this type of dialogue as much as spoken interaction, the available data might not be sufficient to draw substantial conclusions without additional measures. A more detailed explanation of the analytical method of Knowledge 2 will be provided in the next section. Fourth, critical cultural awareness, which lies at the center of intercultural competence in Figure 1, is excluded from the scope of this study. It is linked

with what Byram (2021) referred to as *political education*, which aims to develop responsible, reflective, and active democratic citizens cross-curricularly as a part of general education. Since it is a product of nationwide pedagogical policy and its implementation, it is not suitable for assessment based solely on textual data from a VE.

Under the restrictions noted above, the following three research questions (RQs) are developed:

RQ 1. What were the characteristics of Japanese participants' ICC attitudes in comparison to the participants from other countries?

RQ 2. How much ICC knowledge did Japanese participants have? Did their knowledge differ from that of participants from other countries?

RQ 3. Were the ICC skills, the skills of interpreting and relating, and the skills of discovery and interaction, detected in Japanese participants? Did their skills show any differences from those of participants from other countries?

Method

Research Design

For the analysis of ICC with the written text data, the distinction between *thread starters* and *replies* is significant. While thread starters start a thread, a new discussion topic that might or might not be replied to later, replies comment on a message that has already appeared as a thread starter or a reply. For the ICC aspects that concern participants' pre-established knowledge and attitudes, i.e., attitudes toward topic selection and Knowledge 1, thread starters are examined. On the other hand, replies are used to analyze the ICC aspects enacted during the interaction, i.e., Knowledge 2 and the ICC skills.

RQ 1 (attitudes) can be examined quantitatively by measuring participants' fluency, as reflected in the total number of postings and words, in an international VE project. The more often and the more words they write, the more a proactive attitude can be detected. Participants' topic selections when posting their thread starters are also analyzed quantitatively, as the discussion topics often influence their curiosity and interest.

A qualitative analysis is employed for RQ 2 (knowledge). Byram (2021) classified ICC knowledge into two types: Knowledge 1 and Knowledge 2. Knowledge 1 (knowledge about

social groups and their cultures, both in their country and in other countries) is introduced as a thread starter in an online discussion rather than being discovered during it. Statements that represent Knowledge 1 are identified thematically.

Since Knowledge 2 (knowledge of interaction processes at both individual and societal levels) is acquired cross-curricularly, it is no easier to detect in an online discussion than Knowledge 1 is. Byram explained Knowledge 2 "is theoretical knowledge about relationships among groups and group identities, including, for example, the concepts of 'prejudice' or 'stereotype' and how these impact on interactions" (p. 47). This study limits the scope of Byram's Knowledge 2 to participants' general understanding of the formation of prejudices or stereotypes. In the VE project examined, participants were asked to read the two articles contained in Sagawa (1986) and Sagawa & Tanibayashi (1989) that explained how prejudices and stereotypes form, and to post their thoughts as replies. These replies are subject to thematic analysis, and statements reflecting their mindset regarding prejudices and stereotypes are identified. Some of the participants' replies are provided in *Appendix A*.

As for RQ 3 (skills), all the acts referred to - *interpreting*, *relating*, *discovering*, and *interacting* - are enacted in interactions among participants. Participants' replies that include statements that represent either one of these acts are identified thematically.

Participants

The participants in this study were involved in *Project Ibunka 2023*, a 12-week international VE project, spanning from the last week of September 25, 2023, to December 23, 2023. The overall group of participants comprised 334 English language learners from 10 educational institutions across six countries: Brazil (27 respondents from the Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná), Indonesia (105 respondents from four high schools, SMA Plus PGRI Cibinong, SMK PGRI 2 Cibinong, SMK PGRI Subang – Indonesia, and SMA PGRI 3 Kota Bogor), Ukraine (138 respondents from Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute), South Korea (5 respondents from Seoil University), Taiwan (15 respondents from New Taipei San-Chung Commercial and Industrial Vocational High School), and Japan (44 respondents from Bunkyo University and Yokohama National University). Since postings by South Korean and Taiwanese participants account for 0.81% and 0.61% of all the postings, respectively, they will be excluded from the analysis. After excluding postings from these two countries, 314 participants remain. Watanabe (2020a), Watanabe (2020b), and Watanabe (2024) provided more detailed explanations about Project Ibunka.

Data Sources

Text data accumulated in Project Ibunka 2023 served as the primary data source. Participants were encouraged to write and post their messages to a dedicated, password-protected online bulletin board. Only those learners and instructors who consented to the sharing of their postings and personal pictures for pedagogical purposes were registered and permitted to enter the site. By the end of the project, 5,558 postings had been accumulated. Excluding those by South Korean and Taiwanese participants, the remaining 5,479 messages were examined.

School Life, Cultures, and Social Issues - World Peace were the three major themes of discussion in the project. Each one lasted four weeks and was organized sequentially. As for School Life, subthemes were created for each participating institution. Participants coming from the same institution formed a team, posted their messages about their school life, and replied to the posts made by other participants, The second theme, Cultures, had 27 subthemes, such as festivals, annual/seasonal events, tourist spots, theme parks, Christmas, birthday parties, dating, St. Valentine's Day, fast food/snacks/sweets, etc. The third theme, Social Issues - World Peace, had 8 subthemes, such as wars and conflicts, crime, educational issues, family and human issues, economic and political issues, health and diseases, environmental Issues, and other topics. At the start of the project, participants were instructed to post, for each of the three primary themes, at least one large message (200 to 400 words) on a specific subtheme, along with three or more short comments (150 or more words) in response to others.

Results and Discussion

RQ 1: Attitudes

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistical analysis of individual post counts by country.

Table 1

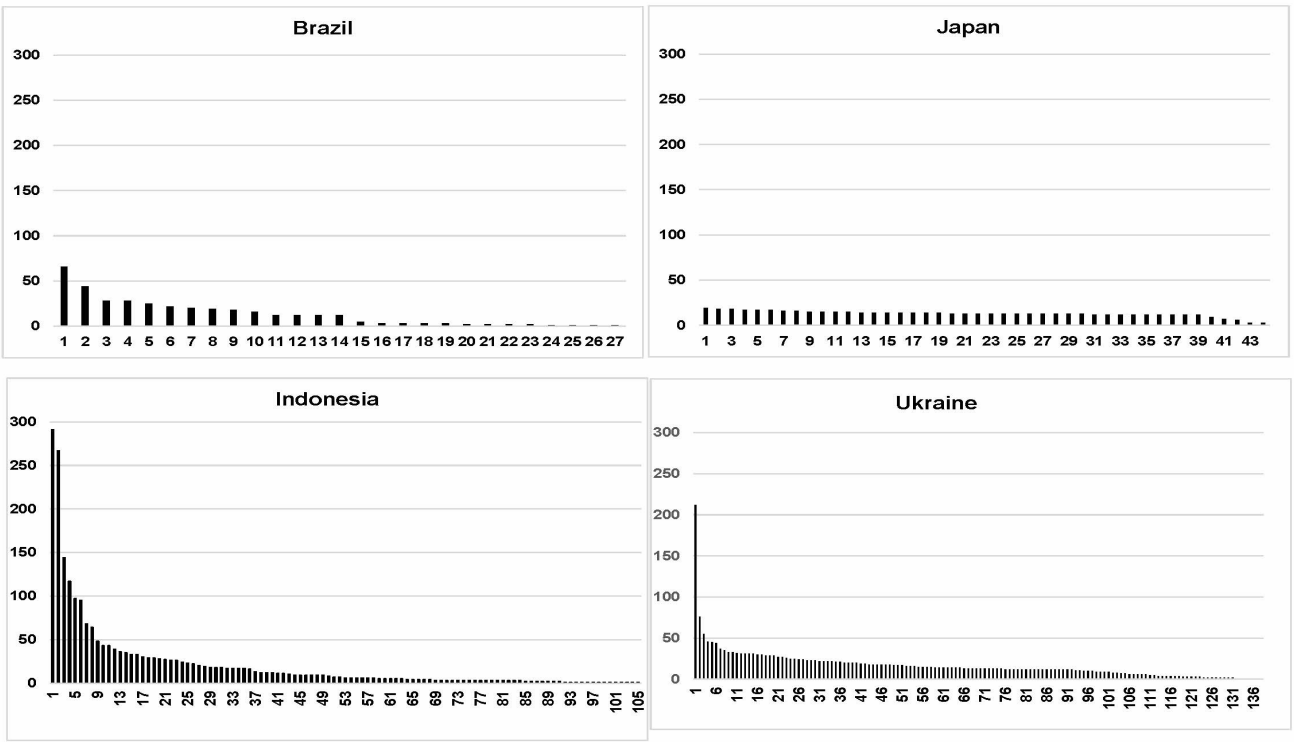
Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Individual Post Counts by Country

Country	Max	Min	Mean	Median	SD
Brazil	66	1	13.4	12	15.3
Indonesia	291	1	21.0	6	43.4
Japan	19	3	13.1	13	3.4
Ukraine	212	1	16.9	13	20.4
Total	291	1	17.4	12	28.9

What is distinctive about the Japanese participants is that both the maximum number and the standard deviation are the smallest. This means that the total counts of individual participants' postings from Japan show much less variation than those from other countries. The following graphs, which represent individual post counts by the four countries in Figure 2, make this more evident. In each graph, the vertical axis shows the total count for each individual, and the horizontal axis shows the individuals themselves. Individuals are arranged in descending order by the number of messages posted.

Figure 2

Graphs for Individual Post Counts by Country



While Japan's graph is flat, other graphs show a rapid decline. The number of participants with more than 24 posts (twice the overall median of 12) and the ratios of them by each country are: Japan, 0 (0%); Brazil, 5 (18.5%); Indonesia, 25 (23.8%); and Ukraine, 30 (21.7%). In each country except Japan, some participants exhibited extraordinary curiosity and interest in the project. The Japanese might have been content to fulfill their minimum writing requirement, at least one large article and three replies for each of the three themes. *Table 2* presents the descriptive statistical analysis of word counts of individual participants' posts by country.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Word Counts of Individual Posts by Country

Country	Post (Tot.)	Words (Tot.)	Max	Min	Mean	Median	SD
Brazil	363	80455	508.5	118.0	221.6	215.2	85.7
Indonesia	2208	540945	825.0	107.0	245.0	240.2	121.9
Japan	575	119392	347.3	135.3	207.6	206.8	33.0
Ukraine	2333	522934	475.3	119.8	224.1	235.4	67.4
Total	5479	1263726	825.0	107.0	230.6	224.0	89.8

The Japanese participants' maximum, mean, median, and standard deviation are the smallest. This shows that they wrote fewer words than participants from other countries. This reflects their lower language fluency, which may have influenced their reduced curiosity and interest in this VE.

Table 3 shows the number of thread starter posts and the ratio for each subtheme of the theme, Social Issues – World Peace, by country.

Table 3

Thread Starter Posts and the Ratio for Each Subtheme of the Theme, Social Issues - World Peace by Country

ID	Brazil	Ratio	Indo-nesia	Ratio	Ja-pan	Ratio	Ukrai-ne	Ratio	Total	Ratio
71	1	7.1%	32	9.5%	0	0.0%	58	24.0%	91	14.3%
72	4	28.6%	55	16.4%	3	6.8%	23	9.5%	85	13.4%
73	4	28.6%	55	16.4%	7	15.9%	17	7.0%	83	13.1%
74	1	7.1%	62	18.5%	7	15.9%	28	11.6%	98	15.4%
75	0	0.0%	34	10.1%	1	2.3%	25	10.3%	60	9.4%
76	3	21.4%	57	17.1%	5	11.4%	41	16.9%	106	16.7%
77	1	7.1%	24	7.1%	19	43.2%	43	17.8%	87	13.7%
78	0	0.0%	17	5.1%	2	4.5%	7	2.9%	26	4.1%
Total	14	100%	336	100%	44	100%	242	100%	636	100%

Notes. 71. Wars and Conflicts; 72. Crime; 73. Educational Issues; 74. Family and Human Issues; 75. Economic and Political Issues; 76. Health and Disease; 77. Environmental Issues; 78. Other Topics

Japan's ratios show greater variation than those of other countries. 43.2% of postings from Japan were about *77. Environmental Issues*. This is the highest of all four countries. While reports on the Russo-Ukrainian war have been continuous up to now, it seems that the war was not a subject for Japanese participants to take as a thread starter. They were more selective in their choice of subthemes.

These findings can be summarized as the following answer to RQ 1:

RQ 1. What were the characteristics of Japanese participants' ICC attitudes in comparison to the participants from other countries?

Answer. They showed less curiosity and interest in intercultural communication. Their comparatively lower language fluency might have influenced this. Japanese participants were more selective in choosing topics about global issues. They did not show much interest in international political matters. This tendency might have also influenced their ICC attitudes.

RQ 2: Knowledge

As for Byram's Knowledge 1, thread starters representing the author's knowledge of social groups and their cultures, both domestically and internationally, were identified. The theme, Cultures, encouraged participants to describe the unique features of their cultures from their viewpoint. There were also many posts about cultural aspects or social issues that had happened or were happening outside of their own countries. For instance, participants wrote about entertainment produced initially in other nations that featured abundant representations of cultural differences. An Indonesian wrote about Hiroshima-Nagasaki, a Ukrainian about Israel and Palestine issues, an Indonesian about dirty bombs, a Ukrainian about 9/11, etc. These pieces of non-domestic information will form a crucial basis for understanding cultural diversity.

However, most of them were general statements and contained few details about social groups and their cultures, not only their own but also those of participants from other countries. The following message from an Indonesian appears to be suitable as evidence for Knowledge 1 since it represents her understanding of the Japanese people, contrasting with the Indonesian:

> *Thread Starter*
> "Japanese people are very disciplined, and their strict attitude toward time is noteworthy. Even with a maximum of 10 minutes grace period for an event, being late or not on time is seldom an issue".
> *Reply (by a Japanese participant):*
> "I was very surprised to read this and learned how Japan was viewed. I am often late, so it was painful for me to read this. I would like to know how Japanese students feel when they hear this".

A Japanese participant found an Indonesian's view to be false. This interaction also highlights the difficulty in achieving Knowledge 1.

For the analysis of Knowledge 2, participants were asked to respond to the two posts explaining the formation of prejudices and stereotypes. Both posts collected nearly 50 replies in total. Their interactions on the discussion board proceeded smoothly, and no significant disagreements or cultural differences were detected among participants. Participants, regardless of nationality, can be judged to have achieved some part of

Knowledge 2, although it might not be perfect. Refer to Appendix A for some of the participants' replies to these two articles.

The following answer will be provided for RQ 2:
RQ 2. How much ICC knowledge did Japanese participants have? Did their knowledge differ from that of participants from other countries?
Answer: Although the participants, including the Japanese, knew about non-domestic matters, their knowledge did not show sufficient achievement of Knowledge 1. Detailed descriptions of social groups and their cultures in countries other than their own were scarcely found. They attained some of Knowledge 2, specifically, knowledge about how prejudices or stereotypes are formed. These findings regarding Knowledge 1 and 2 apply to all of the participants in general. No unique features of Japanese participants were found.

RQ 3: Skills

The Skills of Interpreting and Relating

The skills of interpreting and relating were evident in replies. It was a natural reaction when participants encountered a culturally unique description in a posting. They interpreted and related it within their own country's context. The following are examples:

Example #1

Thread Starter

"Ivana Kupala Festival, is a traditional summer festival celebrated on the night of July 6th in Ukraine. It is a celebration of love, nature, and the mystical forces believed to be especially powerful on this night". (Ukraine)

Reply

"Ivana Kupala Festival of Ukraine and Tanabata Festival of Japan share some features. For example, it is held one day before it, on July 7th. It is also celebrated at night and has a mystical and romantic nature". (Japan)

Example #2

Thread Starter

"Gotong Royong in Indonesia is a traditional social custom that signifies mutual assistance and cooperation for the common good. It encompasses activities such as work sharing, mutual aid for life events, disaster relief cooperation, etc. Amidst the hustle and bustle, residents come together to overcome challenges and celebrate successes together" (Indonesia)

Reply

"Gotong Royong is a noble value in Indonesian culture. When a big earthquake hit the Tohoku District of Japan on March 11, 2011, even in Yokohama, there was a blackout. One of my friends who lived near his house was in trouble because his parents were unable to return home. My family invited him to my house and he spent the night with us" (Japan)

Example #3

Thread Starter

"The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in severe long-term environmental impacts. The major concerns are: the nuclear waste of NPPs in Zaporizhzhia and Chornobyl; the damaged water, sanitation, and waste management infrastructure; the use of more fuel for the constant movement of military equipment; and toxic substances leaking from ammunition remains into the soil, affecting surface and groundwater quality". (Ukraine)

Reply

"There were similarities between Ukraine and Japan regarding the issues of nuclear power generation and waste. I learned that environmental problems caused by the war are unique to Ukraine. I feel helpless to learn that Russia's attacks are causing not only human damage but also environmental damage". (Japan)

Skills of Discovery and Interaction

The skills of discovery and interaction are employed when people find themselves lost in aspects of others or other social groups. Unfortunately, evidence of meaning negotiation that bridges serious communication breakdowns was not found in participants' replies. This might be related to the fact that participants in Project Ibunka were free to choose a post for their reply and could avoid responding to incomprehensible posts. However, when participants found something unclear in the original post they were responding to, they often included a few questions in their replies, mainly at the end of messages. These questions were raised not only to better understand the original post but also to encourage the original poster to further develop the interaction. Most of these inquiries were found on the subtheme discussion boards for Cultures, where participants described unique features of their cultures. The following are the examples:

- Do different regions have their variations of these performances? (Ukraine)
- Lebid was saying "students' discussions about cultures allow them to embark on a journey of discovery". What discovery did you make? (Japan)
- I got curious about the Vinnytsia Gastronomic Festival and the Trypil culture festival, when do they happen? Is it just once a year? (Brazil)
- Have you ever participated in or witnessed celebrations like Ivana Kupala Day in your culture or another? (Indonesia)

These examples can be regarded as evidence of the skills of discovery and interaction. However, because of the limitation of the written interaction, they cannot prove the satisfactory achievement of them.

The following is the answer to the fourth research question:
RQ 3. Were the ICC skills, the skills of interpreting and relating, and the skills of discovery and interaction, detected in Japanese participants? Did their skills show any differences from those of participants from other countries?
Answer. Some evidence of both the skills of interpreting and relating, and the skills of discovery and interaction, was found. However, regarding the skills of discovery and interaction, due to the limitations of online written interaction, their satisfactory achievement might require additional real-time spoken interaction practices. Culturally unique trends of Japanese participants were not observed compared to participants from other countries.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the literature review section of this paper, Kikuchi et al. (2015) suggest two intercultural communication-related pedagogical approaches for Japanese learners: to increase opportunities for meaningful interaction with foreign people in English and to promote intercultural awareness through self-discovery. In addition to the suggestions by Kikuchi et al., this study provides the following measures to enhance ICC among Japanese learners.

Given Japanese learners' lower fluency (RQ 1), slowing the pace of intercultural dialogue should be considered. To this end, asynchronous online interaction, whether written on discussion boards or spoken via video recordings, should also be utilized so that Japanese learners might take their time to compose their ideas. Complementing asynchronous online communication with synchronous one enriches VE (Yamanouchi & Mazzotta, 2024).

In addition to the topics that explore cultural differences among participants (RQ 2: Knowledge 1), various global issues, including political ones, should also be introduced in VE (RQ 1: a tendency to choose certain topics more frequently than others). Some scaffolding about the topics by an instructor in advance of the actual exchange might be necessary for Japanese learners.

For RQ 3 (the skills of interpreting and relating and the skills of discovery and interaction), even the internationality inherent in the discussion of ICC might be removed for Japanese learners. Even within the same country, diverse values exist, and people cannot fully understand one another. This is especially the case in the high-contextual society of Japan, where people tend to avoid dialogical discussion and accept others without sufficient reasoning. The need for rich intercultural communication is evident. Intercultural dialogue among Japanese learners in English can foster ICC among them. In order to achieve this, Kajitani (2018)'s *philosophical dialogue* should be acknowledged and practiced. Although the term "philosophical" is used, it does not imply learning philosophy as specialized knowledge; rather, it refers to an activity in which ordinary people question and reconsider what seems self-evident in their daily lives by inquiring, thinking, speaking, and listening.

In fact, Kajitani has been organizing many philosophical dialogue workshops among ordinary people in diverse institutions, from elementary schools to graduate schools, as well as in local communities and companies. He set up eight principles of a philosophical dialogue, which are translated into English by Otake (2021) as follows:

1. You can say anything you want.
2. Don't take a negative attitude toward what others say.
3. It's OK to just listen and not speak.
4. Ask questions of each other.
5. Speak from your own experience, not from your knowledge.
6. It's OK not to speak coherently.
7. It's OK to change your opinion.
8. It's OK to lose your understanding of what you have believed you understand.

The purposes of these rules are: ensuring freedom and safety for expression, recognizing the significance of not speaking and simply listening for mutual understanding, encouraging participants to ask questions of one another, promoting two-way rather than

one-way communication, sharing based on one's own experience, not on abstract knowledge, and accepting one's opinions to change and confusions to arise. These rules align with Byram's ICC skills and critical cultural awareness, where people's established values and beliefs are challenged through dialogue.

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Appendix A

Participants' Replies

To Article 1

- For me, when I was a junior high school student, I could not communicate with one teammate properly. We played well together in elementary school, but we stopped talking to each other over time when we got to junior high school. Junko and Peter were able to talk to each other at the end, but in my case, we ended up not having just a conversation. Sometimes people dislike each other for no great reason, sadly. (Japan)
- Unfortunately, racism still exists in the world. In this story, even in the absence of explicit racism, people like Junko may face difficulties due to being singled out as a foreigner. Everyone has different feelings and opinions about what others say and do. (Japan)
- The country and the other country are in the war don't know each other enough and don't try to know each other. Also, they may see each other as bad guy deliberately to justify themselves. If they have a chance to know each other, they will not fight a war and they will become friends and help each other. (Japan)
- The issue you have raised in your post is extremely important, especially in the teenage years. Psychologists say that teenagers have a deep need for the emotional security, encouragement and support which friendship provides and it doesn't matter which religion, color of skin and beliefs their soul mates are or/and have. Being sure that one has a true friend in life makes it easier to cope with the problems of daily life. I absolutely agree with you that the main reason why very often young people can`t understand each other is because of the embarrassment specific to adolescence but not a particularly dislike or prejudiced against people of other cutlers. This adolescence embarrassment and lack of life experience is the barrier for not getting along well with each other. Fully understanding the reasons why it isn`t so easy for teenagers to have good relations, though, may be as difficult as understanding the human mind itself. (Ukraine)

To Article 2

- In my experience, I had made fun of a half-Japanese, half-American senior when I was 6. I was ignorant about racial issues, I said things like he was not Japanese. Our teacher got mad at me afterwards, but he kindly forgave me despite his hurt feelings. From the incident, I have really paid attention to my attitude towards people or the way I think of them. One person is one person, not a racial person. This is very important mind when you communicate with foreigners. (Japan)

- There is one action by Hyde that I admired. It is that he did not quit interaction with American. If I were, I would avoid to talk deeply with foreign people. By doing so, he could notice that not all the American people are like peaches. From this, I learned that it is important to keep interacting with people who have different culture. (Japan)
- Hyde's journey of understanding, from categorizing people as either "American" or "Japanese" to realizing the complexity of individual personalities, is a compelling narrative. His initial perception, shaped by his father's analogy of Americans being like peaches and Japanese like bananas, reflects the influence of cultural stereotypes. However, his experiences in both the US and Japan challenged these simplistic comparisons.

How can Hyde's experience serve as a reminder for individuals to challenge preconceived notions and seek diverse perspectives in fostering understanding between different cultures? (Ukraine)

- Through these experiences, Hyde learned that the root of prejudice and misunderstanding lies not in cultural differences but in the inherent tendency of humans to hurt one another. He recognized that individuals from all backgrounds experience pain, rejection, and discrimination, and that these experiences can shape their perceptions of others.

Hyde's journey highlights the importance of personal connections and open-mindedness in bridging cultural divides. By engaging with individuals from diverse backgrounds, we can challenge our preconceived notions and develop a more nuanced understanding of different cultures. (Ukraine)

Author's Biography

Masahito Watanabe, has been teaching general English courses to university freshmen and sophomores for over thirty years. His general areas of concern include English linguistics, phonetics and phonology, second-language acquisition, and related areas. Correspondence should be sent to*: wata33@gmail.com*

ICLE GILE 2024 Conference Schedule
September 28

9:45-10:00	**Opening Remarks**			
10:00-10:55	**Plenary** **Enhancing Student Development Through Inclusive and Diverse Educational Practices: A Case Study of IISO** Hussam Zaineh			
	Room 1	**Room 2**	**Room 3**	**Room 4**
11:00-11:25	**Using Ads in Thai Language and Intercultural Learning** Pornsri Wright	**Using Ethics of Care in a Language Classroom** Aleksandr Gutkovskii	**Interacting with Multicultural Families to Foster Intercultural Sensitivity** Olaf Fors, Phillip A. Bennett, and Emily Marzin	**Charting a Peaceful Future: Student Perspectives on Peace** John-Guy Perrem
11:35-12.00	**Teaching Intercultural Awareness Through Holiday TV Ads** Javier Salazar	**Reflections on Accessible and Inclusive Teaching** Sharon Sakuda	**Images, taxonomies & cross-cultural understanding** Cameron Romney	**Being global: Japanese university student beliefs** Caroline Hutchinson

12:50-13:15	**Poster Session**	
	My students don't talk Timothy A Opitz	**Using Cultural Appropriation to Increase Cultural Sensitivity** Samar Kassim

	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 4
13:25-13:50	**SDGs, songs, and storytelling to build gender equality and intercultural sensibility in ELE** Adiene Roque de Hishiyama	**Service-Learning as a Way Forward: University Students Supporting and Advocating for Immigrant Youth** Kelly King	**Pathways to Empower Japan's Youth** Hideki Iizuka	**Four Needs of Japanese Language Learners for Fostering ICC** Watanabe Masahito
14:00-14:25	**World Day for Cultural Diversity: Taking intercultural awareness on board** Eduardo Vila López and Ishida Keiko	**Understanding Refugee Struggles and Education Challenges: Insights from Our Learning Journey** Sera Suzuki, Kentaro Iwai, Masaki Kaneko, Akane Akiyama, and Nausheen Khan	**Exploring Students' Future Identities in Japan** John Rucynski	**Co-Learning in an Intercultural Communication Course: Japanese and International Students Take on Tabunka Kyosei, or Multicultural Coexistence** Yojiro Hemmi
14:35-15:00		**Mediating ingroup/outgroup perception through the use of Japanese immigrant narratives** David Dotsman	**Social constructivism: An ALT's changed worldview** June Ha Kim	
15:20-15:45	**The Construction of a Multilingual-Multicultural Identity** Queena Xu	**Critical and Creative Thinking about Culture** Kip A. Cates	**Teaching CLIL Course on Asian Cultures** I-ting Tsai	
15:55-16:20	**Ethnography research on the language and identity of a Canadian Hong Konger** Wing Yiu Ling	**Engaging Students through Deep Culture Activities** Eric Fortin	**'Japan is the best': Countering Japanese exceptionalism in the classroom through critical pedagogy** Suprateek Chatterjee	
16:20-16:45	**Closing remarks and announcements**			

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1. promote the integration of global issues, global awareness, and social responsibility in language teaching
2. foster networking and mutual support among language educators dealing with global issues
3. promote awareness among language teachers of important developments in global education and the fields of environmental education, human rights education, peace education and development education

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