

## 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。

**Please cite this article as follows:**

Watanabe, M. (2025). Japanese University EFL Learners' Needs for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC): A Cross-National Comparison. In: J. Salazar, G. Benthien & E. A. Marzin (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication & Global Issues in Language Education 2024 Conference Peer-Reviewed Proceedings*. Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). pp. 66-89. Retrieved from: <https://icle.jalt.org/mod/page/view.php?id=179>

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?

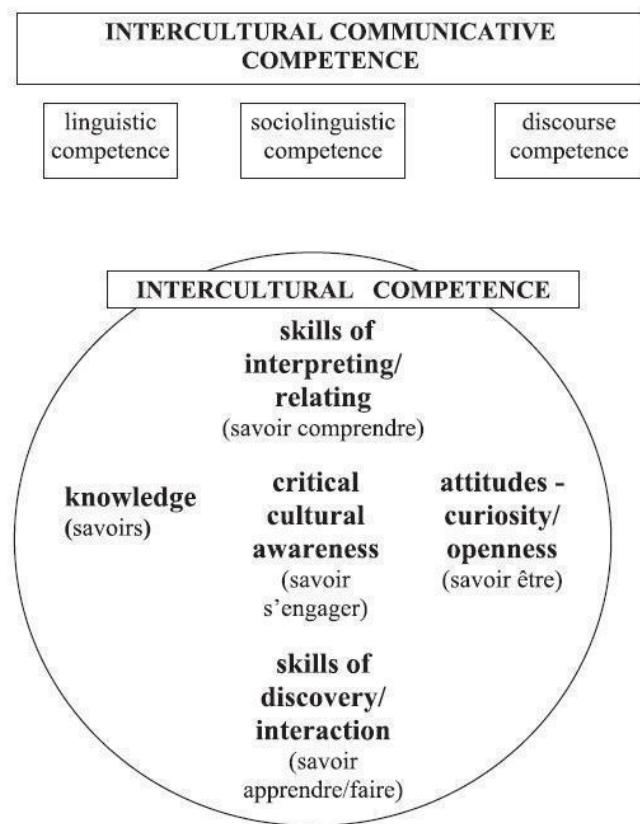
## Literature Review

### *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 & Tanabayashi (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**

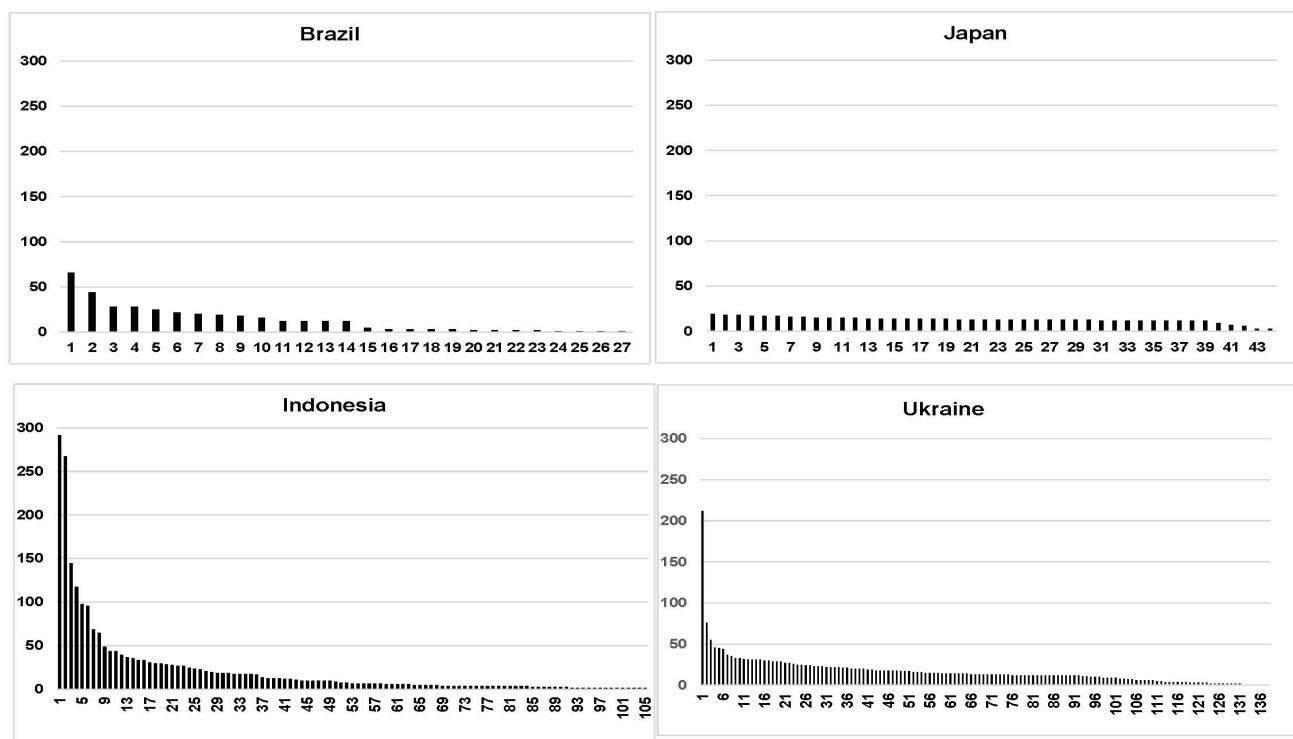
### **RQ 1: Attitudes**

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 meaningful 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 cultures. 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)

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