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Exploring students' perceptions about intercultural communication education: Rethinking the design and facilitation of a course in Japan



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Abstract

Researchers and intercultural educators have put forward various theoretical principles and pedagogical ideas related to the design and implementation of intercultural communication (IC) courses. Recently, researchers have called for curriculum development to include students' voices about their intercultural communication education (ICE). This paper reports on a study which examined 42 students' perceptions of an intercultural communication course taught over one semester at a university in Japan, focusing in particular on motivations for students' intercultural learning and their strategies for maintaining or further developing their IC competence upon completing their studies. Students were also asked to consider the significance of ICE in terms of their life experiences. Survey results revealed that participants enrolled in the IC course to reflect on their study abroad experiences, develop tangible skills for their vocations, and effectively manage IC interactions. They also claimed that learning about perceptions and IC transitions contributed to their understanding of their own experiences and broader intercultural issues. The study contributes to understanding of what students who choose to enrol in an IC course potentially seek from such a course in this context and how they interpret its significance in terms of their own goals and anticipated life trajectories. It also offers some implications for the design of future IC courses.

Keywords: intercultural communication education, student perceptions, student motivation, course design, intercultural resources

Introduction

In accordance with increasing virtual and physical mobility and the need for higher education institutions to produce interculturally competent graduates, a growing number of students are now

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within this paper.

encouraged to (or required to) take intercultural communication (IC) courses (Dupuy & Warner, 2021). Many of these courses are not only for language majors but also attract students across disciplines including international studies, business, law, and education. Broadly speaking, the teaching of IC tends to focus on developing students' awareness of cultural differences, their place within a globalized and diverse society, and how to interact effectively and meaningfully in these spaces. Bennett (2008, p. 8) describes intercultural communication education (ICE) as “[t]he intentional and systematic effort to foster intercultural learning through curriculum design, including pre-departure, on-site, and re-entry activities, and/or course content emphasizing subjective culture and intercultural interaction, and/or the guided facilitation of intercultural experience”. This definition encompasses several elements of ICE, which is facilitated in different ways around the world (James, 2005; Dervin & Tournebise, 2013).

The practice of ICE tends to be informed by research on a wide range of IC phenomena, such as, culture shock (e.g., Neuliep, 2017), cultural adaptation (Kim, 2017), dimensions of different cultures (e.g., Robie, Brown & Bly, 2005), perception, cultural values, and beliefs (e.g., Liu & Fang, 2017), as well as linguistically focused and critically informed perspectives (e.g., Dasli & Diaz, 2017; Dervin & Gross, 2016; Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013). Indeed, as Dervin & Tournebise explain, “[t]he field as such is not unitary but complex, as it is represented by ‘multiple strands of research’ and practice worldwide” (2013, p. 533). However, studies that examine how students perceive their experiences of ICE and its development are currently underrepresented (Díaz & Moore, 2018; Simpson, *et al.*, 2020). The analysis of students' perceptions about their ICE is critical, as “students' voices regarding what it means to be “interculturally competent” and the traits that this may require, do not necessarily match pedagogical endeavours” (Díaz & Moore, 2018, p. 92). This study explores Japanese university students' motivations to enrol in an IC course and their reflections on what elements (i.e., concepts) they viewed as personally meaningful. The study also looks at participants' beliefs about how they can enhance or maintain their IC skills following the course. These responses are then discussed considering how they may inform future courses.

ICE in the Japanese higher education context

Since the early 2010s, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan has stipulated the teaching of IC through English language education and content courses to promote effective communication and global citizenship (Bradford, 2019). Specifically, MEXT aims to foster tertiary students with the “ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons” (MEXT, 2014, p. 1). Consequently, policies to achieve these goals have been implemented at all levels across universities. For example, university students are expected to complete compulsory language classes as part of their degree regardless of their areas of study. At the management and faculty level, MEXT has created various initiatives (e.g., Top Global University Project, Global 30 Project) for universities to internationalise their institutions (Allen, 2019a).

To further facilitate these initiatives, ICE has become an educational priority. Universities have created faculties and programs to offer IC courses in English and Japanese (Sakuragi, 2008) (e.g., dedicated faculties for ICE and ICE integrated in language education). These programs have aimed to foster “Japanese university students to think, work and act within a global context” (Fritz & Sandu, 2020, p. 600), to develop open-mindedness in young people and overcome future potential IC challenges in a global workforce (MEXT, 2012). Furthermore, IC courses are offered through English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) (e.g., Bradford, 2013, 2016; Rose & McKinley, 2018). That is, teaching IC in English, to those who speak English as a second or foreign language and focus on developing IC competency and awareness rather than language skills (Bradford, 2019). However, while researchers have noted the benefits of IC study in the Japanese higher education

context, these courses are often taught by L1 speakers of English who are not necessarily trained as IC specialists (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1991; Shibata, 1998). Furthermore, these courses typically focus on comparing cultures in a lecture-type format, with little practical or reflective activities designed to strengthen IC learning (Kurihara, 2021). This is also compounded by the fact that MEXT has not provided any pedagogical guidance (Fritz & Sandu, 2020), which has created a significant gap between institutional policy making and practice (Moore & Diaz, 2019). Moreover, teachers should be trained in IC and have relevant competencies such as self-awareness, an understanding of learners' needs and knowledge of current theoretical and practical research in ICE (Shibata, 1998). To close this gap, such teachers need to review the literature surrounding the design and implementation of IC courses. A review of relevant literature on IC course design will inform teachers of the basic elements required as well as some of the pedagogical classroom challenges, which are discussed in the next section.

Designing an IC course

Gudykunst *et al.* (1991, p. 272) designed a master syllabus for an introductory IC course, as it is often “taught by instructors who have no formal graduate training in the area”, and therefore no knowledge of the requirements needed to teach the course. In this master syllabus, the authors outlined four areas that are significant to the design and implementation of an introductory IC course. These areas are: (1) philosophical issues in teaching IC (e.g., conceptualisations of IC and culture-specific or culture-general approaches); (2) pedagogical challenges; (3) course content, including appropriate texts, course aims, and assessments; and (4) teaching resources and styles.

The challenges in designing successful IC courses are like those in any other discipline. However, Gudykunst *et al.* (1991) outlined two differences that should be considered in IC courses. Firstly, a course designer should have equal focus on affective, cognitive, and behavioural learning. Using Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) three components of communication competence: knowledge (refers to cognitive), motivation (refers to affective), and skills (refers to behaviour), the authors claimed that activities and assessments should be planned with these three areas in mind. Secondly, how the instructor teaches the content and engages with students should also be taken into consideration. The language used by instructors and students in the classroom is significant in several ways. Instructors should encourage inclusive language, avoid stereotyping and recognize their own biases in the process of teaching and learning, which should be reflected in the resources used in the classroom as well (R'boul, 2021).

In terms of participation, Gudykunst *et al.* (1991) pointed out that students should not be forced to contribute or partake in classes. The authors also claimed that instructors should model “effective intercultural communication in the classroom” which will “provide a supportive environment for student participation” (p. 277). Instructors should create an environment that promotes independent learning and accommodates students from various cultural backgrounds. Gudykunst *et al.* (1991) refer to Jenkins' (1985, p. 4) general suggestions as good points of reference for teachers and students' participation in class:

1. Develop strategies for equalizing participation.
2. Respond positively to every student's effort to participate.
3. Allow time for student participation.
4. Encourage students to share culture-specific knowledge and experience while avoiding asking them to act as spokespersons for their races [or respective cultures]

The last topics covered in the master syllabus are resources for IC and teaching styles. The authors discussed the three elements of teaching: cognitive, affective, and behavioural that should be integrated into the resources of the course, summarised in Table 1 below (adapted from Gudykunst *et al.*, 1991, p. 279):

Table 1 Summarized from Gudykunst *et al* (1991) resources and elements of teaching

| Learning Component | Description |
|-----------------------|--|
| Cognitive component | This refers to the facilitation of the course through lectures, additional readings, videos, group discussions and analysing situations that touch on various aspects of IC. |
| Affective component | The affective component is enacted in the classroom through the various uses of role-plays, structured exercises that have clear processes and end goals, as well as imitating intercultural interactions. |
| Behavioural component | To achieve behavioural development, the authors suggested the use of analysing examples in the field, observations and personal experiences communicating with those from other cultures. |

In terms of the master syllabus, some studies have investigated its effectiveness for implementation in the classroom. For example, Díaz and Moore (2018) demonstrated how the suggestions of Gudykunst *et al.* (1991) applied to IC courses currently offered in universities. While they agree with the overall syllabus, Díaz and Moore (2018) outlined several shortcomings with such an approach. Firstly, they noted that such a guide is not universally applicable to all contexts. They suggested that “research into context-sensitive pedagogies grounded in grassroots-level involvement of stakeholders across the board is necessary to complement these discussions” (Díaz & Moore, 2018, p. 92), such as those adopted in the current study. In addition, Díaz and Moore (2018, p. 92) also suggested that:

With respect to the development of learning objectives, for instance, further research on students' perspectives may provide important insights... Recent studies suggest that students' voices regarding what it means to be “interculturally competent” and the traits that this may require, do not necessarily match pedagogical endeavors...

Specifically, students' expectations about what it means to be intercultural, and the teaching of research-based content, need to be aligned. Similarly, there needs to be a clear link between theory and classroom practice. Secondly, as theories progress, so too should the syllabus be updated and reflect current advances in scholarship (Díaz and Moore, 2018). This is also applied to technology and authentic resources available to the teacher, to be effectively and thoughtfully implemented in the classroom (Berti, 2020). For example, internet resources now allow students to access and experience authentic examples of culture and communication. As a result, elements from the research presented in this section have been followed or adopted in the current IC course which is discussed later.

Challenges to Western theories of IC

While many studies thus far have outlined ‘best practice’ for teaching IC, there have been recent challenges (e.g., Miike, 2017). One challenge is that ICE is “still dominated by many popular Western-centric models that claim to describe, analyse and capture what is meant by the intercultural” (Simpson *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). This is problematic as these models essentialise cultures and languages and fail to account for individual variation. Recently, researchers have advocated for a ‘de-westernization’ of ICE and to “emphasise mutually-satisfying interactions of identities and

cultures without the psychological burden of conforming to western behaviours and traditions of thinking” (R’boul, 2021, p. 145). Furthermore, R’boul (2021) has called for a “decolonisation” of the IC field, which aims “to deconstruct and unravel power imbalances and skewed geopolitics of knowledge” (p. 153). To overcome these challenges in ICE, it is critical for teachers to develop context-sensitive curricula. Such an approach in ICE is one that includes “concepts, assumptions, principles, and models originated from indigenous cumulative wisdom” (Miike, 2017, p. 68). While most teachers have the intention to avoid stereotyping, occasionally this occurs when dominant studies in the field are used as the basis for teaching IC. For example, researchers have suggested that the use of Hofstede’s (1991) indexes to describe the ‘cultural traits’ of individuals, often lead to overgeneralisations and ethnocentric views, and are a reductionist approach to IC¹ (R’boul, 2021). At minimum, all IC teachers should offer students the opportunity to voice their experiences which may differ from the findings in dominant studies. More critically, ICE teachers should include more context-sensitive content and together with students, explore theories to expose them to different points of view that diverge from the “mainstream”. Teachers may find that students’ experiences are better explained by context-sensitive content, which would positively influence the learning process. Contextual considerations such as the inclusion of culture-sensitive explanations of IC phenomena (e.g., emic understandings of language and cultural behaviours) were used in the facilitation of the course in the current study and supplemented the assigned textbook.

In the context of the issues discussed above, the overall aim of this study is to examine Japanese students’ perceptions of ICE through their experiences studying an IC course and to consider the implications for future courses in Japanese higher education. Typically, in higher education contexts, teachers and students’ ideas about assessments, coursework, and the design and facilitation of courses are not the same (Lynam & Cachia, 2018). For IC teachers, it is imperative that they consider students’ perceptions of ICE to deliver more practical and applicable courses. Very little is known about Japanese students’ motivations to study IC as well as their ideas about the various concepts covered in IC courses and the strategies they can use for future learning. Analysing students’ perceptions about their ICE is important for the better understanding of the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of the learning process (Covert, 2014).

The study aimed to investigate the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive:
 - a. their motivations to study IC?
 - b. the significance of IC for their future?
 - c. their strategies in maintaining and improving their IC skills?
2. How can participants’ reports enhance IC courses in Japanese higher education contexts in the future?

Methodology

The research presented in the current study is part of a larger project investigating the impact of study abroad on the development of Japanese students’ IC. The results in the current study expose the realities of these participants considering their ICE. It is hoped that language and content teachers in Japan (those in similar working conditions to my own) can incorporate the insights from this study into their IC syllabi and delivery. For teachers outside of Japan, it is anticipated that the results of this study will show how student voices can inform pedagogy in universal ways. Before going into the specifics of data collection and analysis, it is necessary to reflect briefly on issues related to my own positionality as a teacher-researcher and to explain some of the details of the course.

Positionality statement

Analysing one's positionality is effective for scholars to reflect on how their identity and experiences impact upon their research (and teaching) (Berger, 2015). I am a white male, who grew up in a low socioeconomic area in Australia. From an early age my experiences traveling to Asia (as an elite athlete) sparked my interest in Asian cultures and languages. Before and during my undergraduate degree (studying Japanese language and linguistics), I experienced two study abroad (SA) programs in Japan. I completed my PhD in Australia (Japanese sociolinguistics) and currently hold a tenured position in a university in Japan. These experiences have impacted upon the way in which I teach and research IC. While the participants' nationalities in the current study differ from my own, we do share some commonalities in our life experiences, such as second language learning and SA. For example, during my SA, I experienced cultural and linguistic challenges just as the participants in this study have. During classes, I draw on these experiences as examples to help students take up an alternative perspective on cultural and intercultural phenomena familiar to them. Such cultural and linguistic experiences have also impacted upon my course design. For instance, having lived in both Tokyo and Osaka studying Japanese language and culture, I came to appreciate the local linguistic and cultural behaviours unique to both areas (e.g., Osaka dialect). I use my own such experiences to shift the focus beyond the notion of 'national culture' and stress to students that local cultural contexts are varied and complex.

The university and the course

The current study took place in a private university in the Kansai region of Japan. At this university, students are enrolled in a faculty dedicated to the learning of foreign languages and cultures. There are approximately 160-180 students enrolled in this cohort, and most are English-language majors. A mandatory component of this faculty is a one-year SA period, in which students choose and undertake programs at our partner universities. Some are Chinese language major students and undertake studies in mainland China and Taiwan. Other students can undertake dual language courses in Korea or Central Asia, where they undertake studies in the local language (e.g., Korean and Russian) and English. When students return from their SA, they specialise in one of the five following areas: area studies, IC, translation and interpreting, language communication education and language analysis. Students are highly motivated to gain proficiency in language and their chosen area of focus. Students may take the course because it directly relates to their specialisation or as an elective to complete their degree.

During 2019-2020, participants enrolled in an introductory IC course. The overall aim of the course was to introduce students to IC concepts, develop awareness and understanding of the complexities of intercultural interaction and increase positive attitudes toward communication with those from differing cultural backgrounds. In this course, participants completed 15 weeks of study, which included weekly readings from the course textbook (*Introducing Language and Intercultural Communication*, Jane Jackson, 2014) and material from The Conversation website². The book was chosen as it covers salient concepts in IC and supplements the theory with authentic exemplary materials from diverse contexts (e.g., case studies and critical thinking exercises). Students were also continually encouraged to share examples from the Japanese context. Throughout the course, students completed four discussion activities. As a group, they responded to chapter questions from the textbook. This activity was implemented as a means of confirming students' comprehension of the content and developing their critical thinking skills. For example, the following question is one that students analysed as a group in their first discussion activity:

Besides the reasons mentioned in this chapter, identify, and discuss three other imperatives for studying language and intercultural communication today. (Jackson, 2014, p. 23)

In addition to discussion activities, students also completed two concept quizzes in the middle and at the end of the semester. Students also created a group workshop which focused on analysing two cultural contexts and two IC concepts. Table 2 shows a condensed overview of the course:

Table 2 *Course overview*

| Week | Content |
|------|--|
| 1 | Chapters 1 & 3 – Importance of studying IC and defining the role of culture |
| 2 | Discussion task 1 |
| 3 | Chapter 4 – Language, communication, culture, and power in context |
| 4 | Discussion task 2 |
| 5 | Chapter 5 – Language and non-verbal communication |
| 6 | Mid semester quiz |
| 7 | Chapter 7 – Ethnocentrism & Othering: Barriers to IC |
| 8 | Discussion task 3 |
| 9 | Chapter 8 – Intercultural transitions: From language and culture shock to adaptation |
| 10 | Discussion task 4 |
| 11 | Chapter 6 – Language and identity in IC |
| 12 | Final Quiz |
| 13 | Chapter 12 – Global citizenship and IC competence |
| 14 | Course wrap up & presentation preparation |
| 15 | Group presentations |

The course included several “think, pair, share” activities, where students were invited to consider situations related to IC and reflect and discuss their potential actions with their group. In addition, lectures often included videos available on YouTube, to highlight the IC concepts being discussed. Lastly, content was simplified to help students understand the various topics covered in this EMI course. While students had a high level of English, they indicated that the language used in the textbook and handouts were challenging³. As a result, diagrams, tables, and other forms of visual representations were used to demonstrate more complex topics discussed in the classroom. Overall, students were taken through a process of theory, critical thinking and discussion, reflection, and application addressing areas of learning such as cognition, affection, and behaviour (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1991; Díaz & Moore, 2018). The general teaching approach for this course is demonstrated in Figure 1.

While Figure 1 outlines the main approach to IC teaching, other aspects of the course included collaboration (i.e., students develop skills in working together to complete an assessment task) and interaction (i.e., classes were designed to be interactive rather than a lecture style course). These aspects ensured that both teacher and students were contributing to the learning process and modelling appropriate IC (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1991; Baker, 2011). More specifically, during each class, students were given dedicated time to draw on their own ideas and experiences when discussing IC concepts. For example, when discussing intercultural transitions (i.e., moving between cultural

contexts), students were presented with the theory from the textbook and other sources that focus on Japanese student experiences more specifically. Students were then asked to reflect on their SA and whether they experienced similar situations (e.g., loss of identity, isolation). All students were encouraged to share their valuable experiences, and any narratives that were contrary to the theory were explored together and limitations of these theories were discussed.

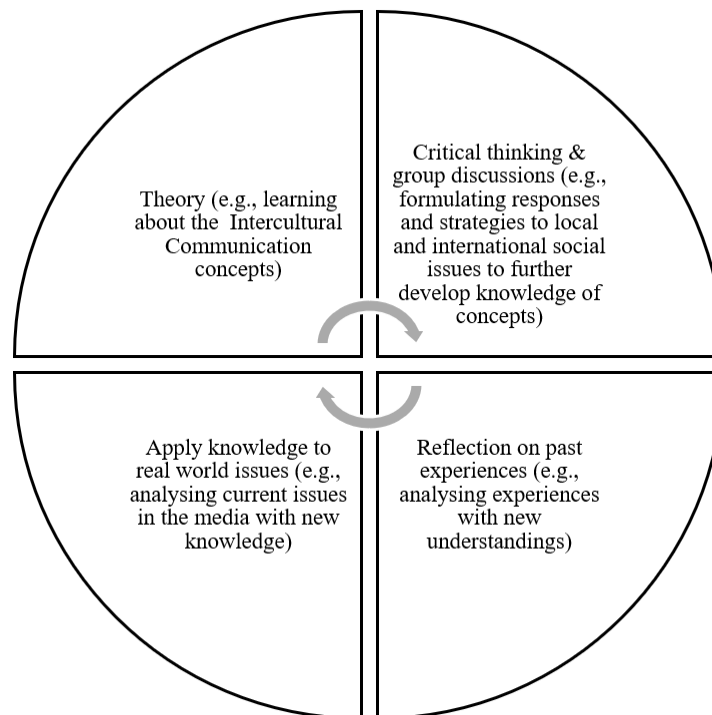


Figure 1 Overview of teaching approach

Participants

In the current study, 42 participants completed a reflective survey about their IC learning in the 2019-2020 academic year. Of the 42 participants, 21 were male and 21 were female. Participants were not all Japanese – five participants were from other countries in South-East Asia and South America. In addition, of the 42 participants, they also spoke languages other than Japanese and English, including Chinese, Korean, Nepali, Hindi, Tagalog, Spanish, and French, and participated in SA programs in various countries including Australia, the United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Korea, and China. Participants in this research were students in their third or fourth year of study, aged between 21 and 22 years⁴. These participants were purposively selected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Baker, 2011) as they were enrolled in this elective IC course and could offer insights into their experiences.

Reflective surveys and qualitative analysis

The data in this study derives from an online survey administered in the last week of classes aimed at asking participants to reflect on their intercultural experiences ($n = 42$). The survey consisted of a total of 47 questions, taking approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete. Section one focused on demographic information, which included a mix of open and closed questions. Section two focused on their SA experiences and contained a mix of open, closed and Likert scale items. Section three focused on post-SA experiences and consisted of open and closed type questions. Section four was

an activity where students responded to open questions after watching intercultural interactions on YouTube. These videos depicted actors dealing with IC conflict. For example, one video depicted actors who arrived late to a meeting and were confronted by their colleagues. Students had to consider the types of IC processes involved.

The surveys were presented to the participants in English. This was because students were expected to complete assessments and participate in classes using English. While this was a stipulation of the course, this may have impacted the ways in which the participants may have expressed themselves. However, as noted above, participants were language majors, and completed a SA program focusing on English for one year prior to completing this course and should have sufficient language skills to answer the questions. In addition, the concepts discussed in the survey were reviewed in the course, allowing students to answer questions from a point of knowledge.

Qualitative research methods were used in this study to capture and analyse participants' reflective thoughts and experiences. Other studies that have investigated similar phenomena with varying sample sizes have used interviews (e.g., Zimmermann, 1995; Moore & Díaz, 2019) surveys (e.g., Cox & Yamaguchi, 2010; Ward & Masgoret, 2004) and other mixed method research instruments (e.g., Gu *et al.*, 2010; Jackson, 2009) to capture and analyse participants' beliefs about IC phenomena. Unlike surveys used for quantitative means, surveys have been recently adopted by qualitative researchers as they are unobtrusive, accessible and offer anonymity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Braun *et al.*, 2020). For example, Braun *et al.* (2020) suggested that qualitative surveys are able to offer valuable insights into participants' subjective experiences, narratives, practices, positions, and discourses, as examined in the current study.

Once participants had completed the survey, their responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Swart, 2019). A thematic analysis involves identifying recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In this study, the process involved reviewing, coding (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) and grouping the responses into various categories. These categories emerged from the data as recurring patterns. These categories were related to the various questions asked in the survey and the participants' responses. These categories were then displayed as themes in the current study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Results and Discussion

In this section participants' responses⁵ to the questions in the survey are categorized and analysed. The responses include their motivations to enrol in and perceptions about the course, and their strategies for maintaining or improving their skills and knowledge after they complete their studies.

Figure 2 presents the types of questions participants reflected on before, during and after the course.

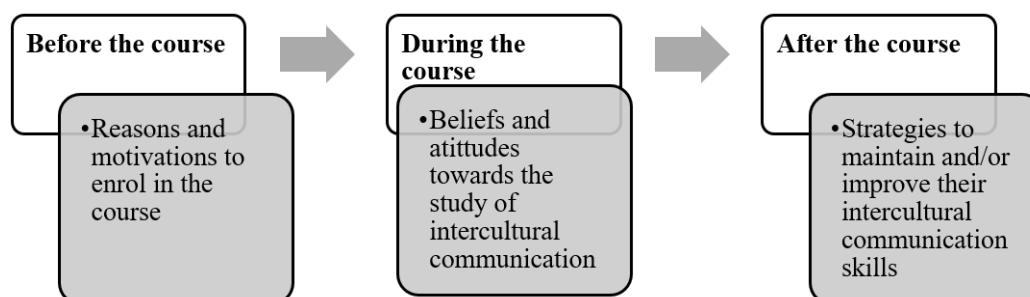


Figure 2 Overview of reflective questions design

Analysing the responses to these questions may inform pedagogy in the following ways:

1. Students' motivations to undertake intercultural studies may indicate the value they place on learning and predict their willingness and success in IC situations.
2. Students' responses about the relevance and interests of particular IC concepts may direct more focused teaching, and how to draw theory and practice together in a meaningful way.
3. Students' willingness to maintain or improve their skills post-course may influence an instructor in preparing and planning explicit autonomous learning activities.

In the next section, participants' reasons for enrolling in this IC course are explored.

Motivations for enrolling in an IC course

Participants were asked to respond to the question, "what motivated you to choose this particular course?". This question was asked to determine participants' ideas about why they were interested in undertaking IC study in general.

The responses were categorized into three main groups: (1) *Interest in IC* in which participants reported on their general curiosity about the subject; (2) *Introspection & self-improvement*, in which reports were based on participants' experiences and how the course could help improve their intercultural skills; and (3) *Class type* (which included syllabus, content, and language of instruction) & *other*, in which responses were related to the format and delivery of the class as well as recommendations from participants' peers. These categories are exemplified overall in Table 3:

Table 3 *Categories of responses (Motivations to study IC)*

| Category | Example | % |
|----------------------------------|--|-----|
| Interest in IC | "I just was interested in intercultural communication" | 45% |
| Introspection & self-improvement | "I thought I can review my experiences in this course" | 36% |
| Class type & other | "This class seemed like more interact [sic] class not just listening in classes" "My friend asked me to take this class together" | 30% |

Almost half of the participants indicated that they participated in the course because they had a general interest in IC. As students were language majors, it seems natural that they were interested in building upon their language skills by examining how communication practices vary across cultures. For example, one student offered an insightful response:

MPM: One large motivation factor for me was that I was interested in human interactions and the complexities that surround it, including clashes of culture and race, and solutions to some of society's problems.

Additionally, more than a quarter of participants were motivated for self-reflective reasons. These responses typically revolved around their SA year and participants claimed that studying IC would help them discern their experiences. For example, two students noted:

FPK: To understand the cultural differences after having a SA [study abroad] Program.

MPY: I thought it might be a good review of my study abroad, and maybe there are something I can't noticed [sic] during my study abroad.

Students also reported that they were motivated to enrol in the course as it was delivered in English by an L1 speaker, convenient and practical considering their schedules (class time), or after listening to recommendations from their friends. For example, participants claimed:

MPK: It's [sic] English course given by native English speaker.
 MPO: I looked for some courses which were held on Tuesday class 3.
 MPR: Nothing Coz [sic] student elder then [sic] me taught me [sic] this is good class.

The comments in the *Class type & other* category suggest that students are motivated to enrol in this course for reasons other than interest in IC. However, these comments highlight other important factors about the facilitation of the class. For example, as the course is taught in an EMI setting, students can develop IC knowledge and their language skills. Although the goal of the course is not focused on language learning per se (Bradford, 2016), students are still developing advanced language skills in English, such as writing, reading, discussion, and presentation. Furthermore, students are also exposed to more interactive based learning, which encourages the development of critical thinking and debate.

Overall, the comments in this section highlight the varied motivations for students to undertake IC studies, which facilitators might find difficult if they aim to personalise their course and teaching style (e.g., students undertaking the course for reasons other than IC study). However, course texts and previous studies (e.g., Jackson, 2014) have highlighted the various motivations to study IC which includes the reasons given by the participants. Teachers then can highlight the various critical features of the course in their syllabi; indicating how the course may be beneficial to students or stimulate their interests. In addition, participants also indicated that they were influenced by their friends to undertake the course. In a Japanese higher education context, this is common, where students seek advice from older students, in terms of what courses they should study. Often, this advice is focused on the teacher and the content. Teachers who are new to higher education in Japan, may not be aware of how students select courses (see for example, McVeigh, 2002), and may need to adapt to these cultural norms.

Significance of studying IC

All participants were asked to respond to the question, “is developing intercultural skills important for your future? Why or why not?”. All participants responded that IC was an important subject to study for their future, which included careers, developing skills for communication between people, and because the world has become more globalized.

As a result, these responses were categorized in three ways. The first category, *Future selves*, refers to the responses that described the importance of IC study in relation to their future job aspirations, potential places of residence or further education. The second category, *Understanding others, developing skills & awareness*, refers to responses that described the abilities acquired by undertaking IC courses. The third category, *Globalization & diversity*, refers to responses that discussed changes to the economy, global relations, and diversity. Table 4 demonstrates these categories overall, and presents examples and the number of participants who responded.

Table 4 Categories of responses (significance of studying IC)

| Category | Example | % |
|---|---|-----|
| Future selves (e.g., jobs, residence, study) | "I want to work in foreign countries in the future" | 54% |
| Understanding others, developing skills & awareness | "When I interact with people who have a different cultural background, it is important to have intercultural skills to communicate with them more smoothly" | 50% |
| Globalization & diversity | "Globalization is unavoidable and there is going to be more and more of wild mix of everything in the future" | 43% |

The responses here show that participants in this study value learning about IC for various reasons, such as future job aspirations or places of residence or study, such as those noted below:

MPT: Because I want to use English in my career. Probably I might work with overseas [sic] so it is important for me.

FPS: I think it is important because there are many possibilities to meet people from difficult cultural background [sic] in the future.

Many participants viewed the significance of IC competency in relation to opportunities to work in other countries or in international companies in Japan who employ people that have differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Martin and Nakayama (2015) also indicated that for graduates to compete in the world marketplace, they must thoroughly understand how business and cultural behaviours are performed and valued in various countries. While this is a neoliberal position (Kawai, 2009), these students seem to assume that learning about IC is an economic imperative, thus commodifying their ICE.

Students also indicated that studying IC helped them to develop skills to see the world from different perspectives. For example, two participants noted:

FPR: Because you can never not interact with people. And I personally believe every single people [sic] have their own culture so to be living with people even in Japan it is important for me.

FPM: ...it is very important for me to understand different values and cultures and opinions.

Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012) noted that IC is about developing skills that will help people see things from different perspectives and be flexible in their thinking. Based on the participants' responses it seems that they have an awareness of the need to study IC to develop and obtain tangible skills and to be able to use them in the future.

Lastly, participants also claimed that diversity and globalization could pose a challenge should they not have the required skills to interact with those from differing cultural backgrounds. For example, participants noted:

FPA: ... globalization is expanding fast all over the world, so opportunities to meet with foreigners are increasing.

MPR: Very important Japan in [sic] getting more global society, so it helps me.

These comments reveal participants' awareness of how their local community is changing due to globalism. For example, prior to COVID-19, tourists traveling to the Kansai region (where the study

took place) had increased rapidly between 2012-2017 (White, 2019). Participants thus show awareness of the various changes and shifts in demographics (e.g., migrants, refugees, and international students) and the increase of tourists in their communities and how this influences them in their communication with others.

Teachers can adapt their curriculum or course objectives to highlight the ways in which IC courses may be valuable to students in personable ways such as those listed in the above categories. By doing so, the course will become relatable to the student in terms of their experiences and future career goals, situated in their local context. One such method to make the course more personable and practical, is to incorporate the study of linguistic landscapes into the course (Hatoss, 2019). Specifically, this involves examining the prominence of languages used in the local context (i.e., buildings, street signs, university campuses) (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Students can participate in and analyse the linguistic landscapes within their areas of residence (Hatoss, 2019), to give them firsthand experiences of co-cultures within their own cultural milieu.

Students' perspectives on IC learning

Participants were asked to answer the question, "what things have you learned about in this class that you can use or apply in the future?". Overall, participants indicated that developing their awareness of cultural differences was an important element of their learning. In addition, learning about the relationship between language, culture and behaviour was another important area of study.

Consequently, participants' reports were analysed and categorized in three ways. In the first category (*Perceptions*), participants reported that learning about how their views of the world are formed was significant to them. In the second category (*Culture & communication*), participants reported that learning about the relationship between language and culture and the various forms of verbal and non-verbal communication was useful for them. In the third category (*Intercultural transitions*), participants reported that studying the processes involved in moving from one cultural context to another was meaningful to their learning. These categories are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Categories of responses (*Perspectives of IC education*)

| Category | Example | % |
|---------------------------|--|-----|
| Perceptions | "The media or parents can influence how we see out-groups. Now we have easy access to the media, it's important to talk to people from different cultures and see individuals to avoid the generalization" | 55% |
| Culture & communication | "Culture and communication are related with each other, so it is important for me to know other cultural differences for interaction with people" "Gesture is very useful" | 50% |
| Intercultural transitions | "I believe there are many things I could use in the future, for example it's my first time to know that when people get into a new culture, there are four types of result would occur" | 14% |

The reports outline the tangible knowledge they have acquired and their beliefs as to why it is useful for them. Overall, these reports suggest that participants find learning about their perspectives and developing a positive outlook toward others is meaningful.

Participants seemed to respond to this question based on their own personal experiences of IC interactions. For example, participants reported that learning about perception, the ways in which we view the world and how it is influenced, was meaningful to them. For example, two students reported:

FPR: [learning about ethnocentrism] helped me to understand and accept people easily and understand myself, the [sic] human beings better.

FPS: It expanded my opinions through the people who has different backgrounds [sic] and always we should not judge them because of their appearance.

Similarly, participants also reported that learning about the relationship between language and culture and various forms of verbal and non-verbal communication was meaningful to them. For example, two students noted:

MPM: Gesture, verbal communication.

FPK: It made it easier for me to understand the process of cultural interactions.

While these comments are very broad, they show that learning about the specific elements of language, culture and communication is meaningful to these participants. During the course, students reflected on their SA experiences and often spoke about IC issues during interaction between themselves and others (e.g., struggling to produce appropriate non-verbal behaviours such as greetings between newly made friends). Participants may have mentioned these elements of IC because they felt that these concepts are significant in successful communication. In addition, participants may have made these claims because performing appropriate behaviour in a particular context is highly valued in Japanese (Liu & Allen, 2014). Contrarily, inappropriate behaviours are often noticed (Allen, 2019b). For example, if cultural and linguistic expectations are not met when performing verbal and non-verbal behaviour in Japanese, L1 speakers notice the change and may adopt this attitude when engaging in IC.

Participants also reported that developing an awareness of the processes of moving between cultures was significant. One participant noted how this knowledge would be beneficial to them:

MPB: I learned about the different ways to join a new culture, and what methods are most suitable. I can use this information to travel to foreign countries and positively interact with the locals and learn about the new culture.

Participants may have reported in this way as learning about intercultural transitions may have helped them make sense of their SA experiences. Moreover, participants also noted that practical knowledge that can be applied for later use (e.g., travel, work) is meaningful. These reports align with previous suggestions made by researchers in terms of the learning outcomes of IC courses (e.g., Hashem, 1995). Furthermore, participants show that not only do they have the intention of using these skills in the future, but they have also used the knowledge in the course to analyse past experiences.

From the responses in this section, teachers may focus their attention on topics related to perception, culture and communication, verbal and non-verbal language, and how people transition between different cultural contexts, as students find these topics most meaningful to them and their future selves. While focusing on these topics, teachers should also draw on students' experiences as a

resource, to better contextualise the content, and to fulfill the behavioural component of the learning process (Arasaratnam, 2015).

One significant point is that participants did not mention intercultural competency specifically. However, Arasaratnam (2015) noted that models for facilitating intercultural competence include variables such as “intercultural training/experience, empathy, motivation, attitude toward other cultures, and listening” (p. 297). While participants did not report intercultural competency specifically, they do however touch on these variables in the following section.

Students' perspectives on maintaining/improving their intercultural knowledge

Participants were asked to respond to the question, “once the course is finished, in what ways can you maintain or improve your IC skills and knowledge?”. Participants responded in several ways indicating specific strategies. These responses were analysed and categorized in four ways: (1) *Interaction*, in which participants indicated that they would actively seek out people to communicate with as a way to maintain or improve their skills; (2) *Technology*, in which participants noted that they would use technology to help improve or maintain their IC skills; (3) *Education and self-reflection*, in which participants said they would study IC further or expand their perspectives; and (4) *Travel*, in which one participant noted that visiting other countries would be a way to continue to improve or maintain their IC skills. Table 6 demonstrates these categories and examples:

Table 6 Categories of responses (maintaining/improving skills)

| Category | Example | % |
|-------------------------------|---|-----|
| Interaction | “I go to bars to speak in English with my friends” | 86% |
| Technology | “Watch YouTube video related to intercultural communication” | 21% |
| Education and self-reflection | “Taking the class about intercultural communication” “...think about international issues” | 19% |
| Travel | “Traveling” | 4% |

The reports in the *Interaction* category were quite varied in terms of who participants would talk with. Of the 86% of the reports in this category, 31% of participants claimed that they would interact with people who are not Japanese, such as their host families and friends in other countries or their foreign friends in Japan, which is exemplified below:

FPR: I'm keeping in touch with the [sic] friends in UK.
FPI: Actively to [sic] make communications with foreign people in Japan.

Furthermore, 31% of participants reported that they would seek out people with different nationalities and have conversations with them. For example, two participants noted that to maintain or improve their IC competency, they would:

FPK: ...make opportunities to have a conversation with foreigners.
MPG: ...search [for] foreigners in Japan.

Furthermore, 21% of participants also reported that they would seek out new people (both Japanese and others), establish relationships with them, and learn more about their culture and worldview, which is exemplified below:

FPA: Try to communicate with lots of people who's got [sic] a different mindset as many as I can.

The responses show that interacting with those with different nationalities is one strategy that these participants claim may be an effective way in maintaining their IC skills. While previous studies (e.g., Duronto, Nishida, & Nakayama, 2005) have claimed that Japanese tend to avoid uncertain situations, such as interactions with strangers and those with different cultural values, participants in this study recognize the need to continue to interact with those who differ from themselves to broaden their views of the world. This may have been influenced by their SA experiences and further IC learning when they returned to Japan.

Participants also reported that they would use technology as a means to interact with others or use available resources to access authentic material. This demonstrates participants' awareness of the various technologies available to them. This is exemplified by two participants' reports below:

MPU: Watch YouTube video related to intercultural communication...

MPZ: By watching Netflix.

Lastly, only one participant claimed that travel was an effective means of future intercultural development, and previous research has also confirmed this strategy (e.g., Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Arasaratnam, 2015).

Teachers may draw on these reports to focus on how they can equip their students to continue to develop or maintain their skills once the course has ended and promote life-long learning. Teachers should dedicate class time introducing resources that are available to students outside of the classroom (e.g., YouTube), and explain how they can be used to facilitate further learning (Berti, 2020). In addition, teachers should highlight that communities in Japan are diverse and students should avoid stereotyping non-Japanese members as "foreigners". Instead, teachers may choose to engage with the local context and investigate the various community groups and foster meaningful IC exchange (e.g., SIETAR). These groups may then be advertised to students. Additionally, teachers should also be aware of the various courses and groups available to students at the university related to IC and encourage participation.

Implications and Conclusions

Scholars have suggested that student voices are necessary in the design of IC courses (Diaz & Moore, 2018), as they reveal deeper insights into learning and development. In this study, students' perceptions of their ICE extend beyond measuring competency and awareness, which is typically examined only through various forms of assessment. Overall, the results showed that the participants are motivated to study intercultural communication for reasons such as general interest and for self-reflection. The responses also indicated that participants study IC for future work opportunities, developing understanding of others and practical skills to participate in a more globalized world. Participants expressed beliefs about what aspects of IC learning they thought were important, such as perceptions, the relationship between language and culture, and the processes involved in IC transitions. Lastly, the reports indicated that participants are aware of the ways in which they could further develop their skills post-course, such as interacting with those from differing linguistic or cultural backgrounds, using various technologies, and more education and travel. The participants' comments in the current study, thus, offer insights into what is meaningful and why in IC courses from students' perspectives. It is now important to consider what the findings mean for the design of future IC courses in this context.

One first practical implication is that the link between academic knowledge and practical skills needs to be made explicit. Explaining the links between various assessments, activities, and readings, would make the course more meaningful for students and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Furthermore, it is necessary to develop additional activities that analyse or enable participation in IC interactions to consolidate their IC learning. Consequently, a fifth element should be added to Figure 1 (above) that includes skill development for IC interactions. However, in somewhat homogeneous classrooms (Tsuneyoshi, 2018), this is challenging. Technology and other resources may be needed to facilitate actual IC experiences, which may require additional knowledge, funding, and time. The analysis of linguistic landscapes (also discussed above) may be a solution to develop practical IC skills.

The second implication is the need to develop and include explicit instruction about maintaining or improving students' IC skills post-course. Participants' comments showed that teachers should devote classroom time to develop and foster students' future autonomous learning using various resources (Lee *et al.*, 2012). In the course in the current study, there was no allocation of resources to do this; however, as participants noted, explicit instruction on the various groups (e.g., SIETAR) and technologies (e.g., YouTube) available to them, would be beneficial to their IC development. The curriculum would also need to be updated to reflect this inclusion.

The last implication is that reflective activities used in the current study are beneficial to students and should be included in future courses. The reports indicated that students valued activities that asked them to reflect on their SA experiences, which is also supported by previous research (e.g., Arasaratnam, 2015). Participants suggested that studying IC is an effective way to discern their recent SA experiences. However, COVID-19 has disrupted many SA programs, which will limit students' IC experiences. Second-year students at the university in the current study are undertaking online SA programs, and will not have the same level of experience as the participants in the current study, which will impact course design. This may be mitigated with more meaningful local IC activities instead.

While the reports in this study have informed pedagogy in various ways, the small number of participants only offer a narrow view of one IC course in the Japanese context. Additional participants may offer a more varied assessment of ICE in Japan. Future research should engage additional participants to offer a more expansive view. Furthermore, future research could compare IC courses in other contexts around the world. Follow-up studies also need to be conducted to determine the effectiveness of these changes to the course and to gain further understanding into the facilitation of a context-sensitive IC course. Overall, this research offers an initial insight into improving pedagogy and the delivery of IC courses in the Japanese higher education context (and beyond) through the analysis of students' perceptions of their own ICE.

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- 1 It should be noted that Hofstede has argued against such practices (see Hofstede, 2002) in his discussion of the ecological fallacy. However, teachers still use these models as comparisons of culture and explanations for individual behaviour (Simpson *et al.*, 2020).
 - 2 The Conversation website: <https://theconversation.com/au>
 - 3 As part of the study, students were asked to indicate features they liked and disliked about the course. Students indicated that the textbook and readings were their least favourite parts of the course. In addition, they wrote that academic English was challenging.
 - 4 The study was reviewed by the faculty ethical committee. All participants gave informed consent and were able to opt out at any time for any reason without penalty.
 - 5 Participants' responses are shown as FP (female participant) or MP (male participant) plus a pseudonym.