

Incorporating Intercultural Collaborative Learning in Short-Term Exchange Programs

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1. Introduction

The merits of local students and international exchange students having meaningful interactions while studying together have been widely acknowledged both by educators and students alike (Beelen, 2015; Suematsu et al., 2019).

Many international students wish to have more contact with local students, as it facilitates opportunities to make connections and build a network in a new environment. They furthermore see contact with local students of importance in their language acquisition and for informal learning about their host culture, and thus to adjust to this culture. Local students see contact with international students as a good opportunity to learn from other cultures, to improve their foreign languages, and to prepare for a possible stint abroad or for their future career in a more globalized world. (Suematsu et al., 2019).

For educators, Intercultural Collaborative Learning, ICL, can be an important tool for Internationalization at Home, by which students get opportunities to enhance their communication and critical thinking skills and grow their intercultural competence. Other benefits are: a greater motivation for language study, a heightened interest in the cultural backgrounds of fellow students, and finally, the contact with international students can be a strong trigger to go abroad and take away some of the uncertainties students may feel towards that step (Beelen, 2015).

However, just putting students together in one classroom will not automatically make all the different nationalities blend or have students properly detach from their phones to have meaningful interactions. It requires adjustments for those involved, which can make it feel difficult for those not used to this style of education (Horie, 2025).

There are further obstacles for short-term international

exchange programs, as academic calendars and syllabi are set and are not always easily adapted, making it difficult for students to meet during class hours and making group activities logistically difficult. As the selection criteria for these programs are more lenient than for longer-term exchanges, not all students will have a high language command.

How can these obstacles be overcome, and how can intercultural collaborative learning elements be successfully integrated into short-term international exchange programs?

2. Intercultural Collaborative Learning

Intercultural collaborative learning (ICL) has been defined as: Meaningful interactions between participants with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds through learning experiences involving the sharing and acceptance of different ways of thinking. This is done not just by sharing a classroom, but by collaborative work on projects, exchanging ideas, and group work, where participants learn from each other's approaches and communication styles. Metacognitive activities, which reflect on the significance of these intellectual activities, promote a broadening of perspective, increase cross-cultural understanding, develop critical thinking skills, and increase self-efficacy (Suematsu, 2019). For Japanese language learners, ICL furthermore creates an opportunity to experience the language being spoken in a natural way and observe behaviors and interactions between Japanese peers. It is furthermore a chance to make friendship and increase the motivation for language study. (Sato, 2019).

ICL in a short-term exchange should be program activities that facilitate meaningful interactions, which foster curiosity, motivate further (language) study, and increase critical thinking skills, and or trigger the deconstruction of stereotypes.

3. Methods

To evaluate the effectiveness of ICL from the learner's perspective, this study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative student feedback, participatory observation, and a short supplementary survey administered to local students involved in one of the ICL activities. Data was collected surrounding an incoming Japanese language program and an incoming comparative culture program. The first program, designed for undergraduate students from South Korea with an intermediate Japanese language level, and the second for undergraduate students from the USA with no prior knowledge of Japanese, share similar elements, making the experiences of the two different sets of students suitable for comparison.

The questionnaire was designed to measure the extent of contact with local students as well as the perceived meaningfulness of different program activities. It consisted of eleven multiple-choice items, two open-ended questions, and a free-comment section.

The questionnaires were conducted in the first half of 2025 by the author in person, both on paper and online via a QR code link. No audio or video recordings were made. Participation in both the questionnaire and the local-student survey was voluntary. All participants were informed orally and in writing about the purpose, and all data were collected anonymously in accordance with Ehime University guidelines on privacy and data collection.

For the Japanese language program, 13 out of 15 students filled in the questionnaire. All of the 22 students who took part in the comparative culture program filled it in. Of the local students who joined in one of the activities, 28 out of 35 registered students took a separate questionnaire.

In addition to questionnaire data, participatory observation was conducted during several exchange and cultural activities. The author took part as a facilitator and observer, with attention to patterns of interaction between international and local students.

Qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Initial open coding was followed by the development and refinement of broader themes. Three major themes emerged: (1) Motivation for language and culture study, (2) Changing images of "the other", and (3) Increased curiosity or interest in international exchange.

4. Programs

For this paper, the focus was on two different programs with similar elements for comparison.

The first program, a language program for students from a partner in Korea, was started in 2011. Since then, Ehime University has yearly accepted a group of 15 to 20 undergraduate students for a short-term intensive Japanese Language program for the duration of one to two months (except for a pause during the COVID-19 pandemic). To encourage exchange, local students are asked to guide on the first day, and a class where local students and Korean students can interview each other is organized. Over the years, there have been a number of changes in the curriculum and length of this program, which was shortened to one month when it was restarted after a hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic. There have also been fluctuations in the number of participants and their language level. What has not changed is the main objective of the program: studying Japanese Language and Culture while experiencing student life in Ehime Prefecture.

The second program, themed around comparative culture, with two partners in the US, has been conducted yearly between 2012 and 2019, and repeated in 2024 and 2025. Between 20 and 22 community college students, with two accompanying faculty members, stay for two weeks at Ehime University. The participants follow classes and earn credits for a course from their home institution. In addition, Ehime University organizes excursions, cultural activities, a guest lecture, and a single survival Japanese language class. While in Matsuyama, the students take a subtopic from their course and use it for a poster presentation comparing the US with Japan. The poster presentation is organized as a conclusion to the program and held in an open space during lunchtime at a central spot on the main campus, allowing for many chance encounters.

Local students get the valuable opportunity to join the classes and thus experience US college classes without leaving campus. As most students are busy with regular classes, the number that can join the full program is unfortunately limited due to scheduling issues. However, a large number of Japanese students volunteered to help out upon arrival in Matsuyama and to join various other parts of the program, such as making Japanese sweets, visiting Matsuyama castle, and Ishite temple, etc.

Implementing ICL for these short-term programs has

a number of hurdles. The timing and length of the visits make it hard to have the same group of students meet multiple times or have students join more than one class. The goal of Japanese language acquisition during just one month is furthermore not easily matched with existing classes for local students.

Another hurdle is language proficiency; for meaningful interaction during class time, language skills are important (Suematsu et al., 2019). Some might even argue that students first should get to an appropriate language level before taking part in collaborative classes. It is certainly true that when a group is capable of communicating well in one language, it makes things a lot simpler. However, limiting exchanges to those students with a high command of English would reduce the number of opportunities for interaction. The benefits of early exposure are especially high for language learners, and some might not get to the level that would be deemed appropriate, and thus would never get the chance to enjoy ICL. It would therefore be better to adapt formats by adding translations, to have someone ready to facilitate communication, or to choose tasks that are feasible within the language level of the students, than to wait for students to get to a certain level.

5. ICL Activities

For both programs, a common activity with general education students in an intercultural communication course and a dialogue-based art viewing activity with a curator at the Art Museum, Ehime, were organized.

5.1 Intercultural Communication Course

In 2023 and 2024, the Korean students had a joint session with 35 local students enrolled in an intercultural communication class. The class was planned towards the end of the exchange program to give the Korean students enough time to prepare for the interview, which was conducted in Japanese.

Divided into groups, students seemed to feel comfortable in talking with less attention towards them from faculty, with the freedom to help each other out for smoother communication and a degree of autonomy. The students had lively conversations with each other, and students from both sides gave positive reactions about the joint class. Several students stayed a bit longer to exchange contact information. Moreover, a number of the local students came to see the program's concluding

presentation by the Korean students. Students from both sides voiced regret that there was almost no opportunity to meet after this joint class, as the Korean students were already about to go back to their home institution.

For 2025, the class was planned earlier in the program to give students the opportunity to actually meet afterwards. Both classes were divided into five groups of 3-7 persons based on the themes they had chosen for their interview. The groups talked with each other for about 15 minutes, with 5 rotations giving all the students the opportunity to see each other and to gather enough data for their assignments.

The joint session with the students from the US was organized by planning their final poster presentation an hour earlier than usual, allowing for the 35 local students to see the posters and ask questions during class time. With the assignment to ask questions in English, the necessary pressure to actually interact was created. Groupwork helped out students with limited confidence in English, and translation apps were being used as well. The posters furthermore helped in facilitating communication as a visual backup.

5.2 Museum Visit

Both groups visited the collection exhibition of the Museum of Art, Ehime. The collection exhibition offers a large variety of works by artists from Ehime in combination with more historical works, landscapes, Tobe pottery, and other regional crafts, with items and themes being changed regularly. Of the students who had a good look at the exhibition, most were able to discover something they liked but were not familiar with yet.

During the first part of the visit, for icebreaking and to stimulate students to look longer at artworks and talk about what they see with their peers, a dialogue-based art viewing activity was offered by a well-experienced curator. To overcome any possible communication difficulties, a bilingual faculty member was present. Students could thus give their comments either in Japanese or English with simultaneous interpretation. The curator led the group to a work by the printmaker Azechi Umetarō (畦地梅太郎, 1902-1999) and asked students what they were seeing and why they thought that was what they were seeing. During sessions for both groups, various views on the work were presented, and students reacted to each other's views. The exercise is based on visual thinking strategies; by asking carefully crafted questions, students are stimulated to talk and discover.

What could that one element be? Can we find anything more? Looking at the work becomes like a puzzle that the group wants to solve (Yenawine, 2013). After this long and good look, students are free to look at the exhibition at their own pace, with the instruction to talk about the art they see. If they do not like the work, try to see why. If they are fascinated, what is it that makes it fascinating?

For the participation of local students, volunteers were recruited. Unfortunately, either because of timing or the place, few signed up. The students from the US were joined by the accompanying faculty and three local students. As a large number of the students were already interested in art, most enjoyed the visit, and there were many questions about the different printing techniques and artists for the curator.

The visit with the language students appeared less successful. Only two local students joined in, and the autonomy to see the exhibition at their own pace resulted in half of the students sitting down, mindlessly scrolling on their phones.

Giving out a supplemental assignment might be something to consider for the next visit. The other half of the students walked around the exhibition room with the local students assisting in reading the explanations next to the artworks, and trying to explain numerous onomatopoeic expressions from a displayed work by the poet Tanikawa Shuntarō (谷川俊太郎, 1931-2024). Students enjoying Tanikawa's playful poetry together, luckily, still made a meaningful exercise out of the second part of the visit as well.

6. Results

Enthusiasm, meaningfulness, and curiosity, which are indicators of successful ICL, are not the most suitable qualities for objective measurements. However, to see whether exchange continues after ICL activities, to examine which activities furthered the interaction best, and if students report a growing interest in the background of other students, and or an increase in conversations and meetings outside of class requirements are valuable indicators.

Did students meet after program activities? Of the Korean students 69% indicated they had contact with local students outside of program activities, versus 77% of the US students. Even though the language program was twice as long and students were capable of communicating in Japanese, they had less contact with local

students. Moreover, as can be seen in the graph in Figure 1, most US students indicated they had sufficient contact with local students, while most Korean students indicated they would have liked to have had more contact.

Perhaps being able to communicate in Japanese can actually be a disadvantage in some cases for international students. These students are more easily expected to be able to get around on their own. Practicing English is furthermore not part of the exchange; therefore, fewer volunteers show up. Finally, the language program had a smaller number of excursions with local students.

What part of the program did the incoming students have the most contact with local students? As can be seen in Table 1, the answer differs greatly among the students. Interestingly, there does not seem to be much difference in the two programs when it comes to the type of activity named; off-campus, class time, or freer activities on campus. Shy students may benefit from the pressure of assignments that involve needing to make contact while other students do better with more autonomy. This conclusion can also be supported by the feedback of local students who took part in the intercultural communication course. The question "Do you think it is better to have some pressure from assignments or group work in order to interact?" was answered with yes by 13 and no by 15.

While observing the museum visit of the language students, it seemed that it did not work out well for that group. Looking at the questionnaire results, it becomes clear that for about a third of the students, it was the activity during which they had the most contact with

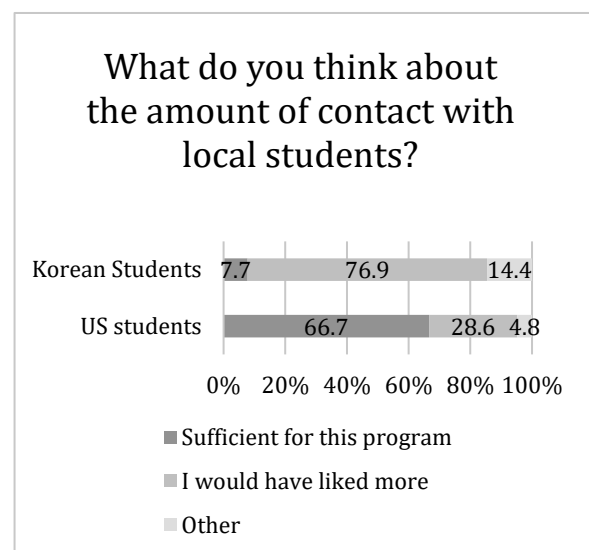


Figure 1: Evaluation of the amount of contact with local students in percentages.

local students. In that sense, it was just as successful as the interview. One of the local students furthermore commented:

“I had the chance to go to the museum with the Korean students and to talk there with them. With the interview the time during class was short, and I could not talk a lot, but at the museum I could talk for 90 minutes, which made it a good experience.”

From the feedback, it can thus be concluded that a variation of activities and settings is needed to accommodate students with differences in language level, experience, and personality.

The local students who joined the programs were students following the intercultural communication course and volunteers.

For the exchange activities with the US students, there were in total 22 volunteers, 11 who registered on time and 11 more who joined at the last-minute. The students who registered were motivated by: Improving English proficiency (6), Making friends (4), Preparation for an exchange to the US (2), Intercultural experience (2), and Broadening world view (1) (multiple responses allowed). For the exchange with the Korean students, there were four volunteers. The students who joined the museum visit were studying Korean and had a strong interest in Korea. As all the volunteer students joined in for different parts of the program, no information was gathered on what activities they found most useful. The oral feedback from students was positive, with several students indicating their regular class schedule kept them from joining more program activities, and their wish to join in again.

The intercultural communication course is part of the general education curriculum and consists of eight

90-minute classes. During classes, an assigned part of the textbook *Intercultural Communication in a Globalized World* (Ikeda, 2020) is discussed. The textbook and the language of instruction are both in Japanese. During four of the sessions, international students or researchers came to the class to be interviewed for 45 to 60 minutes and a full 90 minutes for the reciprocal interview with the group from Korea. The students who filled in the questionnaire had, in addition to the exchange with the Korean students, contact with four students from the US, and one student from each India, Colombia, and the Philippines.

The local students do not belong to one faculty, have differing levels of English, and experience with international exchange. Some students thus had no problem with the assignment of interviewing mostly in English, while others had to struggle a bit.

Of all the interview sessions, the one with the Korean students was most popular among the local students. The comments indicated many students were happy to enjoy international exchange in Japanese, and the closeness of Korea, having both many similarities and differences with Japan. Another factor is that due to the large number of students, everyone was able to talk more. Of 28 respondents to the questionnaire, 22 became more interested in Korea, 7 would like to visit and 5 became interested in academic exchange with Korea.

A clear growth in interest in Korea and international exchange took place just with the five 15-minute interview sessions. Five of the local students met with Korean students to have lunch or dinner together. The other interviews had similar effects, as was visible in the free comment section of the questionnaire as well.

“With this course I had the opportunity to talk with foreigners, which was a good experience and has made me want to go abroad for an exchange or travel”.

During which part of the program did you have the most contact with local students?	
Language Program	1. Museum visit 4 (36.4%) 2. Interview 4 (36.4%) 3. Welcome activity 3 (27.3%)
Comparative Culture Program	1. Off-campus activities 7 (35%) (Castle visit, museum visit etc.) 2. Class time 6 (30%) 3. On campus cultural activities 7 (35%) (Japanese sweets, Japanese music, English lesson)

Table 1: Evaluation of best type of activity for active exchange.

Through interviews with people from various countries, I realized how much I didn't know and how my image of those countries changed.

For some students, it was hard to use English during interviews. However, as the comment below indicates, this does not keep students from learning in such a situation.

"Because my English ability is low the interviews did not go as I had wished, but it still was a good experience as I did get to know more about cultures and got more interested in foreign countries."

The answers to the open question "What would help you to overcome the difficulties you experienced during the interviews?" can be summarized as: Language study (10), Someone for interpretation or a translation device (4), More contact with international students (2), An environment where it is easy to speak (1).

Getting into a situation where students actually need to use English seems to be a motivator for language study as students can see a clear benefit. But even an exchange in Japanese can motivate as can be seen from the comment below.

"Seeing the students from Korea doing their best to communicate in Japanese, I thought I should try harder as well to learn foreign languages."

Rather than expecting all interviews to go well from the start for all participants, it is important to give students the opportunity to try and learn from mistakes, and grow their ability with the increased experience. This is illustrated by the comment below.

"By actually interacting with people from various countries with both success and failure, I think I was able to grow my communication skills."

The student feedback shows us how the incoming programs and exchange students have positive effects on local students' motivation for language study and to go abroad themselves. Asked about the reason behind the wish to go to a certain partner school or region for exchange, students often indicate they had an encounter with a student from that place. The importance of these encounters can be illustrated well by one of the local students who joined the incoming exchange program

with the US in 2024 to prepare herself for an exchange to a different partner in the US. She so much enjoyed it that during her own exchange, she crossed six state lines to meet the students again she had met in Matsuyama. Finally, she joined as a volunteer in 2025 again. Taking good care of incoming students is an investment in local students as well.

7. Discussion

ICL can be a crucial part in helping grow global skills such as communication, collaboration, creative and critical thinking, and being able to see things from someone else's perspective. These important skills are also the skills that are more and more under pressure in our digitalized society. Noreena Hertz, in her book *The Lonely Century* (2021), has pointed out how our overdependence on mobile phones and SNS negatively affects these abilities, leading to loneliness, a decline in physical and mental health, and the breakdown of the bonds that hold our societies together. She makes a powerful case for reconnecting, for our own health and for the health of society. This need to reconnect was painfully clear during one of the museum visits. If students are too much hooked on their phones to communicate in person, a fulfilling international exchange does not happen.

8. Conclusion

This paper started with the question: How can intercultural collaborative learning elements be successfully integrated into short-term international exchange programs?

There is no one-size-fits-all solution but there are two elements that greatly improve the probability of success in implementing ICL: Variety and Flexibility.

As the students' feedback made clear, some need a bit of pressure to overcome their hesitations to interact, others may need some more time, repetition, or encouragement, while yet others fare better with a degree of autonomy. A combination of curricular and extracurricular activities, as suggested by Suematsu, can benefit ICL. The extracurricular activities offer a degree of autonomy, which is valued by participants (Suematsu, 2020). To have meaningful interaction possible, for a wider group of students, variety in the activities on offer is thus needed.

In addition, flexibility to accommodate differences

in schedules, language level, and study objectives is necessary. One could argue that having separate assignments does not count as collaborative work on projects, as students do not work towards one common goal. When the groups have their own themes but share the goal to learn from each other, and meaningful interactions take place, this should be seen as ICL. With this flexibility, ICL comes within reach of a larger group of students who might not have the option to go abroad.

The feedback of students teaches us that even small encounters can have a positive effect on both incoming and local students. ICL is a powerful tool to connect, both locally and globally. These meaningful encounters create more understanding and better international exchange experiences. Short-term programs give us opportunities to offer an enriching experience to local and international students we should not miss.

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