

Global Perspectives on Cool Japan: Exploring the Effects of an English-Medium Instruction Course in a Tokyo Study Abroad Program

Darlene Yamauchi, Bunkyo Gakuin University, Japan

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Abstract

This presentation reported on results from a research study examining the influence of a “Cool Japan” course on 35 international students participating in a unique 3-month cultural and language exchange program at a Tokyo university. Serving as an exploration point for connections and diverse cultural perspectives related to “Cool Japan,” this Hybrid English Medium Instruction (EMI) course was designed for both Japanese and international students. Notably, this marked the first group of international students hosted by the university since the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic, a return that had been eagerly anticipated by students and faculty alike as a symbol of the university's return to normalcy after the disruptions caused by the pandemic. The presentation will discuss specific themes covered in the ‘Cool Japan’ course, and examine specific course content, to provide insights into how it encouraged critical thinking skills for students as well as promoted a deeper self-perceived appreciation for the content of “Cool Japan”. Utilizing an exploratory mixed-methods approach, the research combines qualitative insights from in-depth interviews and quantitative data gathered from a structured self-reported questionnaire. The findings reported from this study demonstrate the course's efficacy in promoting cultural exchange, enriching the educational experience not only for the international students in this investigation but also for the participating Japanese students highlighting the course's adaptability to the post-pandemic evolving global circumstances. This research sheds light on the course's role in enhancing cultural adaptability, fostering cross-cultural communication skills, and navigating the complexities of Japanese popular culture in our rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Cultural Exchange, Cool Japan, English-Medium Instruction (EMI), Study Abroad Program, Cross-Cultural Communication

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Introduction

In this presentation, the outcomes of a comprehensive study that examined the transformative impact of a “Cool Japan” course on international students participating in a Tokyo study abroad program. Against the backdrop of declining university enrollments in Japan and the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, our research sought to explore how a Hybrid English Medium Instruction (EMI) course could enhance cultural understanding and critical thinking skills among students from diverse backgrounds.

First, the presentation provided context by discussing the broader challenges facing Japanese universities, particularly the decline in enrollments. Then, it highlighted the importance of international education initiatives, such as study abroad programs, in addressing these challenges and fostering global perspectives among students. Next, the presentation outlined the specific focus of the study: the impact of a “Cool Japan” course on international students in a Tokyo study abroad program. Finally, it previewed the key components of the research, including the design of the course, the characteristics of the study abroad program, as well as the benefits of English-medium instruction (EMI) methodology with both the participating local and international students. Through a comprehensive analysis, the presentation aimed to shed light on the transformative potential of international education experiences in cultivating cross-cultural understanding and enriching the educational development of students participating in a study abroad program.

Decrease in Enrollments at Japanese Universities

In recent years, Japanese universities have faced a significant decrease in enrollments, posing challenges to the sustainability of higher education institutions in the country. According to projections, the number of 18-year-olds in Japan is expected to decline from approximately 1.1 million in 2022 to 790,000 by the year 2050 (Nikkei Asia, 2023). This demographic shift has contributed to a steady decline in university enrollments over the past few decades. For instance, in 1990, university enrollment in Japan stood at 2 million students, compared to an estimated 1.1 million in 2022 and a projected 880,000 by 2040 (Japan Times, 2023). In 2022, approximately 800 universities in Japan had 626,500 enrollment slots available, with more than 40% of private universities failing to meet quotas for the Academic Year 2021 (Nikkei Asia, 2023). This decline in enrollment has particularly impacted private institutions, where tuition and fees constitute a significant portion (70%) of their income. As a result, about half of Japan's 600 private universities operated below capacity in Academic Year 2022, with one-third reporting financial deficits in the previous academic year (Japan Times, 2023).

Efforts to address the decline in enrollments have included initiatives to attract international students. Projections suggest that enrollments could improve to about 85% if the number of international students increases to the average level of Group of Seven (G7) countries. However, even with this potential increase, there remains a shortfall of approximately 100,000 students annually, highlighting the ongoing challenges facing Japanese universities (Nikkei Asia, 2023).

These trends underscore the need for innovative strategies to address declining enrollments and ensure the long-term viability of Japanese higher education institutions. Initiatives such as study abroad programs and international collaborations may play a crucial role in attracting students from diverse backgrounds and fostering a global outlook among Japanese universities.

Context of the Study

The study was conducted in the context of a unique 3-month cultural exchange program at a small Tokyo university, which welcomed its first group of international students since the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic. The program is aimed to facilitate cross-cultural interactions and deepen students' understanding of Japanese language and culture. Thirty-five third-year students from diverse backgrounds, including the USA, Sweden, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia, participated in the program. During the 3-month program, all content courses were taught in English, allowing students to engage with course material regardless of their native language. Additionally, students had the opportunity to study the Japanese language as part of their curriculum, further enriching their cultural experience.

"Within this cultural exchange program, an English Medium Instruction (EMI) course titled "Cool Japan" was offered to all participating students. EMI, as an instructional approach, was utilized, where English is used as the primary language of instruction, even in contexts where it is not the native language. In the case of the "Cool Japan" course, a hybrid EMI facilitated the participation of both Japanese and international students, allowing them to engage with course content effectively. Through a combination of lectures, group discussions, and hands-on activities, the course provided students with a platform to explore various aspects of Japanese popular culture while enhancing their English language skills. This hybrid EMI approach fostered an inclusive learning environment where students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds could collaborate and exchange ideas. Moreover, this EMI course was considered aligned with the program's broader goal of promoting cultural exchange and cross-cultural understanding among participants.

Specifically, EMI is a teaching approach where the primary language of instruction is English, irrespective of whether it is the native language of the students or the country where the instruction takes place (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Rose et al., 2018). Dafouz and Gray (2022) view EMI as the use of the English language to teach academic subjects, other than English itself, particularly in settings where English is a foreign or second language for some learners or teachers. This pedagogical approach has gained prominence in international education contexts, facilitating learning and communication in English across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In the context of the "Cool Japan" course, hybrid EMI signifies that the course is primarily conducted in English, enabling both Japanese and international students to participate and engage effectively with the course content. This approach promotes inclusivity and fosters a shared learning experience among students from different linguistic backgrounds.

Moreover, the course adopted a hybrid EMI model, integrating elements of both English-medium instruction and English language learning. Japanese students participating in the program completed a spring term class focused on language acquisition, following the Soft Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach (Ikeda et al., 2021; Villabona & Cenoz, 2021). This hybrid EMI model combines language instruction with content-based learning, allowing students to develop language proficiency while engaging with course material related to Japanese culture. The utilization of a hybrid EMI approach in the "Cool Japan" course aligns with the broader objectives of the cultural exchange program, which aims to facilitate cross-cultural interactions and enhance students' understanding of Japanese popular culture.

Hybrid EMI in Practice

Coursework involved both international and Japanese students engaged in collaborative group work on topics related to "Cool Japan." This collaborative effort aimed to foster a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and enhance language skills through learner autonomy and cultural immersion. The group work involved various stages, starting with initial planning sessions where students brainstormed ideas and selected topics of interest related to Japanese pop culture, traditional arts, cuisine, fashion, anime, and manga. These topics were chosen to reflect the diverse interests of the students and provide a comprehensive exploration of Japanese society.

During the execution phase, students worked together to conduct research, gather relevant materials, and prepare presentations. Students were encouraged to utilize a variety of resources, including academic literature, online databases, interviews with local experts, and field trips to cultural sites and events. Through this collaborative process, students increased their critical thinking skills, honed their research abilities, while deepening their understanding of Japanese culture. Group presentations served as a platform for students to showcase their findings and insights to their peers and instructors. Each group delivered their presentations in English, allowing for cross-cultural exchange and communication. Presentations were followed by interactive Q&A sessions, where students engaged in discussions, shared perspectives, and provided feedback to their peers.

Throughout the entire group work process, students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning and exercise learner autonomy. They had the freedom to explore topics of personal interest, take initiative in their research endeavors, and express their ideas creatively. This approach empowered students to become active participants in their own learning journey and develop a sense of ownership over their academic experiences in an international atmosphere.

Furthermore, the collaborative nature of the group work promoted language and culture enhancement for both international and Japanese students. By working together in multicultural teams, students had the opportunity to practice English language skills in a real-world context, improve communication abilities, and gain insights into different cultural perspectives. Japanese students, in particular, benefited from the exposure to diverse viewpoints and language models, which contributed to their language proficiency and intercultural competence while forging meaningful connections with their peers.

Course Feedback From Participants

International students expressed gratitude for the opportunity to immerse themselves in Japanese society and culture. One student remarked, "This program has allowed me to immerse myself in Japanese society, which I wouldn't have had otherwise." Interacting with Japanese peers was particularly impactful, as it helped break down language barriers and deepen their understanding of Japanese culture. As one student noted, "Interacting with Japanese students has helped me understand their culture on a deeper level and break down language barriers." Collaborating with Japanese students enriched the international students' learning experience by providing unique insights into Japanese culture. They appreciated the diverse perspectives brought by their Japanese peers, which enhanced discussions and deepened their understanding of Japan's societal norms and values. Furthermore, the inclusive environment created by Japanese students made them feel valued and respected, contributing to a more meaningful and enriching study abroad experience.

For Japanese students, the cultural exchange program offered opportunities for language improvement and personal growth. They found that explaining Japanese culture to international students not only helped them improve their English skills but also deepened their understanding of their own culture. As one student stated, "Explaining Japanese culture to the international students helped me learn about Japan and improve my English too!" Engaging in discussions about Japan in English also stimulated critical thinking skills among Japanese students. They found that discussing their culture in a foreign language encouraged them to reflect more deeply on Japanese society and its values. Moreover, Japanese students enjoyed the opportunity to share their culture with students from other countries, fostering enjoyment and interest in cross-cultural exchange.

Benefits and Challenges to Hybrid EMI

This hybrid EMI course "Cool Japan" course may be viewed as playing a crucial role in fostering a sense of inclusion among international students within the university community. By offering a curriculum that caters to both Japanese and international students, the course creates opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and collaboration. As a result, international students commented that they felt more integrated into university life, as well reporting they formed connections with their Japanese peers while participating in academic and social activities together. This increased sense of belonging enhanced the overall university experience for international students in this study.

The experiential nature of the "Cool Japan" course contributed to creating authentic learning experiences for all students involved. Through hands-on activities, cultural excursions, and interactions with local communities, students gained firsthand insights into Japanese culture and society. These authentic experiences went beyond traditional classroom learning and allowed students to engage with Japanese culture in meaningful and immersive ways. As a result, students remarked that they felt they developed a deeper appreciation for Japanese culture and a more nuanced understanding of its complexities.

The increased contact between student groups in the "Cool Japan" course may be viewed as facilitating an increased collaboration between Japanese and international students. Through group work, discussions, and presentations, students from different backgrounds came together to explore common interests and exchange ideas. This increased interaction breaks down cultural barriers and fosters mutual understanding and respect among students. As a result, both Japanese and international students benefited from exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences, thus enriching their educational journey and fostering a sense of global citizenship.

The positive effects of the "Cool Japan" course extend beyond individual classrooms to shape the overall international atmosphere within the university. As students engage in cross-cultural activities and interactions, they contribute to creating a more cosmopolitan and inclusive campus environment. This international atmosphere enhances the university's reputation as a global institution and attracts students from around the world. Moreover, it fosters a sense of openness and diversity that enriches the educational experience for all students, regardless of their cultural background.

While the Hybrid English Medium Instruction (EMI) "Cool Japan" course has proven to be beneficial for both international and Japanese students, several challenges and hurdles need to be addressed to enhance its effectiveness and accessibility. One of the primary challenges faced in the course is leveling language proficiency among students and adapting teaching

methodologies to accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds. In a multicultural classroom where students have varying levels of English proficiency, it can be challenging to ensure that all students can fully engage with the course content. Strategies such as translanguaging and active learning techniques may need to be employed to create a supportive learning environment where students can effectively communicate and participate regardless of their language proficiency level (Martin-Beltran et.al, 2017).

Another issue that must be addressed is that while the "Cool Japan" course is designed to cater to both Japanese and international students, there may be barriers to accessibility for Japanese students, particularly in terms of language and cultural familiarity. Japanese students may face challenges in navigating course materials and discussions conducted primarily in English, especially if they have limited English language proficiency. Additionally, cultural differences in learning styles and expectations may impact Japanese students' participation and engagement in the course. Therefore, efforts should be made to ensure that the course is inclusive and accessible to all students, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background (Stigger, 2018). Efforts to overcome these hurdles will contribute to creating a more inclusive and enriching learning environment for all participants.

Conclusion and Future Implications

In conclusion, this presentation has provided insights into the influence of the "Cool Japan" course on international students participating in a 3-month cultural and language exchange program at a Tokyo university. Through a Hybrid EMI approach, the course served as a platform for exploring connections and diverse cultural perspectives related to "Cool Japan," benefiting both Japanese and international students. The findings of the research study demonstrate the course's potential effectiveness in promoting cultural exchange and enriching the educational experience for participants. Through qualitative insights and quantitative data analysis, the study revealed how the course encouraged critical thinking skills and fostered a deeper appreciation for Japanese popular culture among students. Additionally, the course's adaptability to post-pandemic global circumstances highlights its relevance in facilitating cross-cultural communication and enhancing cultural adaptability in today's rapidly changing world.

Looking ahead, several implications emerge for the future of the "Cool Japan" course and similar initiatives. Firstly, there is a need for the promotion of the course to attract more participants and enhance its visibility within the university community and beyond. Effective marketing strategies and outreach efforts can help increase enrollment and broaden the course's impact. Furthermore, refining the course content based on feedback and evaluation is essential for continuous improvement. Incorporating new themes, incorporating interactive learning activities, and integrating student feedback can enhance the course's relevance and effectiveness. Through faculty collaboration there is a potential for expanding the course to include other topics or disciplines, providing students with diverse learning opportunities and fostering interdisciplinary connections. By expanding the scope of the course offerings, the university can further enrich the educational experience for students and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Japanese culture and society as well as aid with dwindling enrollments.

Finally, the "Cool Japan" course holds promise as a vehicle for promoting cultural exchange, enhancing educational experiences, and preparing students for success in a globalized world.

Through ongoing promotion, refinement, and expansion, the course can continue to serve as a valuable platform for cross-cultural learning and engagement in Post-Pandemic Japan.

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