

Evaluating a Practice-Based Program With Foreign Intern Trainees: Impact on Japanese High School Students' Intercultural Understanding and English Learning Motivation

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Abstract

This study examines the educational impact of a community-based intercultural education program involving foreign technical intern trainees, implemented with Japanese high school students. This study aims to foster intercultural understanding and enhance English learning motivation among 54 third-year students through structured interaction in English with three Mongolian trainees working at a local hospital. The seven-session program included photo language activities, artifact exploration using materials from the National Museum of Ethnology, jigsaw reading, and a roundtable exchange. To evaluate changes in students' attitudes and motivation, pre- and post-program questionnaires (21 items, 4-point Likert scale) were administered. Paired-samples *t*-tests revealed statistically significant improvements in 8 of the 21 items ($p < .05$), including willingness to talk to foreigners ($t = -3.67, p < .001, d = 0.64$), interest in diverse cultures ($t = -3.03, p = .005, d = 0.53$), and the desire to use English ($t = -3.47, p = .002, d = 0.60$). Medium effect sizes were also observed in items related to the belief that learning English can broaden future possibilities and the importance of expressing one's feelings in English. In addition, qualitative data from students' reflections were analyzed through thematic coding and text-mining techniques. The results indicated increased empathy, reduced anxiety about English communication, and more proactive engagement in intercultural interaction. These findings suggest that short-term, community-based intercultural programs can produce measurable changes in both cognitive and affective dimensions of global education. The study highlights how collaboration with foreign residents in local communities can function as a practical approach for promoting intercultural awareness and strengthening English learning motivation in non-urban Japanese high schools.

Keywords: foreign technical intern trainees, English learning motivation, community-based program, intercultural communicative competence, mixed-methods research

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of a short-term, community-based intercultural education program on Japanese high school students' intercultural understanding and English learning motivation in a non-urban context. In contemporary Japanese society, increasing cultural diversity has intensified the need to cultivate individuals who can respect others and collaborate across differences to build a sustainable society (MEXT, 2018). This orientation aligns with the frameworks of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and global education (Abe, 2009; Ishimori, 2019).

Although the number of foreign residents has rapidly increased in regional cities—such as Miki City, where the growth rate exceeded 50% between 2017 and 2022—opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction remain limited in many high schools. At the target school, students have had few authentic encounters with foreign residents and often demonstrate low motivation or anxiety toward using English in real communication contexts.

To address this gap, the present study designed and implemented a practice-based program that connected students with local foreign intern trainees. Moving beyond knowledge-transmission approaches, the program emphasized experiential learning and structured interaction. This study therefore investigates whether such a short-term intervention can produce measurable changes in students' attitudes toward intercultural engagement and English communication.

Literature Review

Experiential learning has been widely recognized as a crucial component in fostering intercultural competence and deep psychological transformation among learners. Traditional forms of global education have often relied on classroom-based knowledge transmission; however, recent studies emphasize the importance of participatory and experience-oriented approaches. Ishida and Kawasaki (2022), for example, demonstrate that short-term, intensive international programs can significantly influence high school students' global awareness. Similarly, research on active learning highlights the importance of carefully designed learning environments that stimulate intrinsic motivation and student agency (Makino, 2018; Ohno, 2012).

Another important dimension of intercultural education involves the use of authentic and tactile materials. Goya (2016) and Morimo (2016) argue that hands-on engagement with cultural artifacts enhances learners' concrete understanding of cultural diversity. The outreach kit "MINPACK," developed by the National Museum of Ethnology, exemplifies how museum resources can bridge abstract cultural knowledge and lived human experience. Such materials enable learners to move beyond superficial impressions toward embodied cultural understanding.

At the same time, scholars have pointed out the limitations of school-based international understanding education. Ichinose (2019) notes that collaboration between schools and local stakeholders remains insufficient, particularly in regional areas. Although the number of foreign residents has increased nationwide, educational practices that meaningfully incorporate local foreign residents into classroom learning remain limited.

Furthermore, while previous studies have described various international exchange practices, empirical research that systematically evaluates the impact of community-based intercultural programs on both English learning motivation and intercultural empathy is still scarce. Many reports remain descriptive in nature or focus primarily on urban contexts. There is a need for research that quantitatively and qualitatively examines how localized, short-term programs influence students' attitudes in non-urban settings.

In response to these gaps, the present study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating paired-samples t-tests and computational text analysis, to evaluate a seven-stage instructional design centered on interaction with Mongolian intern trainees in a regional Japanese high school. By focusing on community-based collaboration, this study contributes to the development of empirically grounded models for sustainable intercultural education.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine the effects of a short-term, practice-based intercultural program on students' intercultural understanding and English learning motivation. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-program questionnaires, while qualitative data were derived from students' reflection sheets and speech drafts. The integration of statistical analysis and text mining enabled a comprehensive evaluation of both measurable attitudinal changes and deeper shifts in students' perceptions.

Procedure

The program was implemented over a two-month period (April–May 2025) and consisted of seven sequential activities designed to move from cognitive exploration to communicative production.

- 1) Photo Language: Students analyzed images related to Mongolian culture in small groups. Through gallery walks and English worksheets, they generated hypotheses and questions, encouraging inductive reasoning and collaborative meaning-making.
- 2) Jigsaw Reading: Students read English texts on Mongolian history using a peer-teaching format. This structure reduced anxiety toward English texts while promoting shared responsibility for comprehension.
- 3) Self-Introduction Activity: Students read handwritten profiles of the Mongolian trainees and practiced introducing them in English. Digital translation tools (e.g., DeepL) were used to support comprehension and production.
- 4) Hands-on Engagement with MINPACK: Students explored cultural artifacts from the National Museum of Ethnology (e.g., traditional clothing and equestrian equipment). This tactile engagement grounded abstract cultural knowledge in concrete experience.
- 5) Roundtable Exchange: This central session involved direct interaction with three Mongolian intern trainees. Students conducted self-introductions in English, asked prepared questions, and participated in cultural exchange activities.
- 6) Thank-You Letter Writing: Students composed formal letters in English to express gratitude, focusing on communicative accuracy and intercultural etiquette.
- 7) One-Minute Speech: As a summative task, students delivered short reflective speeches in English. Rubrics and pronunciation support tools were used to scaffold performance and peer feedback.

The program was conducted primarily in English to maximize communicative practice, with limited Japanese support provided when necessary for comprehension.

Participants

Participants were 54 third-year students (Grade 12) enrolled in a general academic course at a public high school in Miki City, Hyogo Prefecture. Although the region has experienced rapid growth in its foreign resident population, students have limited opportunities for authentic intercultural interaction.

Students were organized into small groups (four to five members) for collaborative activities. Due to absences and incomplete responses, valid questionnaire data were obtained from 33 students for statistical analysis.

Instructional Design and Implementation

The instructional design was grounded in a learner-centered philosophy emphasizing facilitation rather than direct instruction. The teacher adopted a supportive role, structuring tasks to stimulate curiosity and encourage autonomous participation.

Placing the roundtable exchange at the midpoint of the program functioned as a motivational catalyst, allowing students to recognize the practical necessity of English communication. The integration of authentic artifacts (MINPACK) and digital translation tools reduced linguistic barriers and enabled students to experience successful communication.

This design aimed to transform the classroom into a collaborative learning environment where students could explore cultural diversity through direct engagement rather than passive reception.

Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data were collected using a 21-item questionnaire on a four-point Likert scale administered before and after the program. Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted using JASP (JASP Team, 2023) to compare pre- and post-program mean scores.

Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) were calculated to assess the magnitude of change. Reverse-scored items were included to reduce response bias and ensure more reliable measurement of students' attitudes, and they were statistically adjusted prior to analysis.

Thematic Coding

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding. Student reflections were coded inductively and categorized into five analytical domains:

- a) Deepening of Intercultural Understanding
- b) Transformation of Stereotypes
- c) Positive Attitudes toward English Use
- d) Proactiveness in Intercultural Exchange
- e) Understanding of Diversity and Coexistence

Computational Text Analysis

Vocabulary frequency analysis and co-occurrence networks were generated using KH Coder (Higuchi, 2022) to visualize patterns across student responses. By integrating statistical and

computational analyses with qualitative interpretation, this study provides a multidimensional evaluation of short-term intercultural intervention effects.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis (Table 1) indicated no statistically significant difference in the overall mean scores between the pre- and post-program surveys. This result may reflect students' prior exposure to intercultural topics (Yamaguchi, 2025) as well as the relatively short duration of the intervention. However, statistically significant improvements were observed in 8 of the 21 individual items. In particular, items related to willingness to talk to foreigners and interest in diverse cultures showed medium effect sizes ($|d| \geq 0.5$).

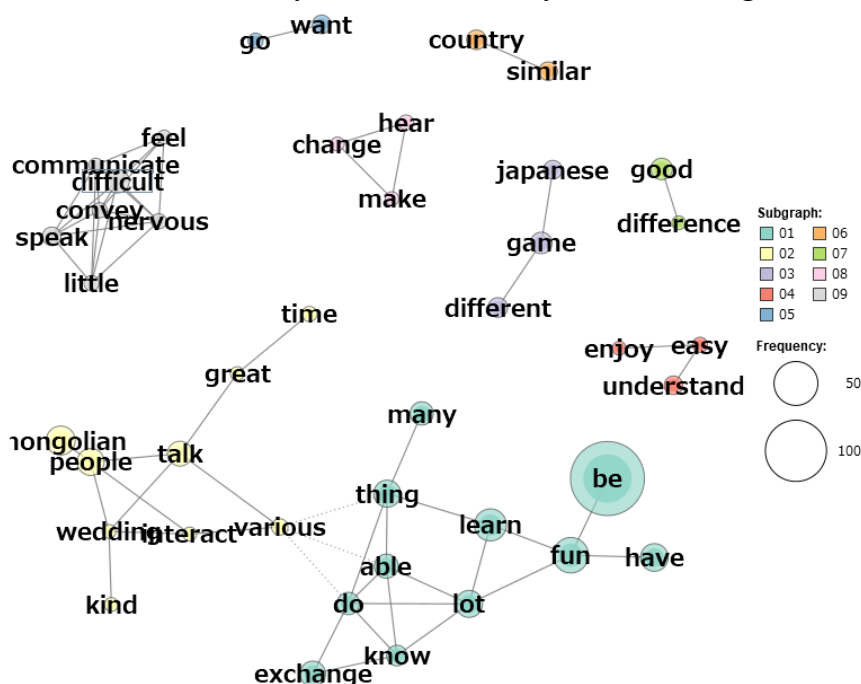
Taken together with the qualitative findings, these results suggest that the program contributed to reducing students' psychological barriers toward intercultural communication and encouraged more proactive attitudes toward engaging with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-program Questionnaire Results for Intercultural Understanding and English Learning Motivation (N = 33)

Items	Pre		Post		<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
1. I think it is fun to get to know people from various countries	3.21	0.65	3.49	0.51	-2.324*	0.405	0.027
2. I believe that getting to know people from different countries broadens my perspective	3.33	0.48	3.58	0.61	-1.966	0.342	0.058
3. I would like to try talking to foreigners, even if I am meeting them for the first time	2.55	0.75	3.00	0.79	-3.672***	0.639	< .001
4. I think it is a good thing to interact with foreign residents living in my local community	2.85	0.71	3.33	0.60	-3.502**	0.61	0.001
5. I believe that an attitude of trying to understand others is important, even if our cultures are different	3.64	0.49	3.61	0.50	0.273	0.048	0.786
6. I believe that the opinions of people from any country should be respected	3.58	0.56	3.61	0.50	-0.255	0.044	0.801
7. I want to respect the differences in cultures and customs of each country	3.49	0.57	3.67	0.48	-1.53	0.266	0.136
8. I think that experiencing different cultures is an interesting experience	3.36	0.55	3.64	0.49	-3.032**	0.528	0.005
9. I believe that if I could actually interact with people from another country, I would want to know more about that country	3.03	0.68	3.39	0.61	-3.2**	0.557	0.003
10. I believe that I will come to feel a sense of familiarity by experiencing different cultures.	3.27	0.67	3.42	0.66	-1.305	0.227	0.201
11. I am not very interested in experiencing different cultures. (Reverse-scored item)	2.76	0.79	2.73	0.91	0.205	0.036	0.839
12. I believe that learning English is helpful for understanding other cultures.	3.27	0.57	3.46	0.62	-1.53	0.266	0.136
13. I believe that learning English will broaden my future possibilities	3.21	0.78	3.55	0.67	-2.602*	-0.453	0.014
14. I want to try my best in English classes.	3.33	0.54	3.42	0.56	-0.902	-0.157	0.374
15. I believe that I can learn about foreign cultures through English classes	3.24	0.61	3.42	0.56	-1.644	-0.286	0.11

Figure 4
Co-occurrence Network of Used Words in Reflections During the Roundtable Exchange



Phase 3: Reflection and Output (Activities 6–7)

During the final activity, the One-Minute Speech, students moved from exploratory learning to active expression. Although some students continued to report challenges related to pronunciation and translation, the qualitative coding revealed a notable increase in statements categorized as Positive Attitude Toward English Use (Category C). Many students expressed a desire to communicate more effectively in English and to further improve their language skills in the future.

Comprehensive Discussion and Integration of Analytical Results

The qualitative analysis of students' open-ended responses suggests that the program had a notable influence on several aspects of students' learning. In particular, the findings indicate positive shifts in students' attitudes toward using English, deeper intercultural understanding, and more proactive engagement in intercultural exchange. These results provide an integrated perspective on how the activities contributed to changes in students' perceptions and learning experiences.

Integrated Discussion by Analytical Category

Deepening of Intercultural Understanding

Through specific learning activities such as Photo Language, MINPACK, and the Roundtable Exchange, students encountered various aspects of Mongolian culture, including daily life, food, traditions, and cultural perspectives. These experiences appeared to deepen their understanding of cultural diversity.

Text-mining analysis revealed frequent occurrences of terms such as “cultural differences” and “tradition.” In addition, the co-occurrence of words such as “culture,” “experience,” and “learn” suggests that students were able to develop a more concrete awareness of cultural diversity through experiential learning.

Transformation of Stereotypes and Prejudices

Although relatively few initial codes were categorized under this theme, several student comments suggested a shift in their perceptions of the Mongolian trainees. Positive remarks such as “the trainee was kind” and “their Japanese was very good” indicate that students began to develop a sense of familiarity and closeness toward the participants.

Some students initially expressed hesitation about interacting with foreigners, with comments such as “Mongolia seemed unfamiliar and distant” or “I was not very interested in Mongolia and did not want to talk to foreigners.” However, direct interaction during the activities appeared to transform these initial impressions, allowing students to reconsider their assumptions and engage more openly with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Positive Attitudes Toward English Use

Across all activities, many students acknowledged the difficulty of using English. At the same time, they expressed comments such as “I could understand a little,” “I was able to communicate,” “I want to try harder,” and “I want to study more.” These responses suggest a growing willingness to confront linguistic challenges and an increase in motivation to improve their English skills.

Text-mining analysis revealed that positive words such as “fun,” “understand,” and “try harder” frequently appeared alongside terms such as “English” and “difficult.” Furthermore, the co-occurrence network showed that action-oriented verbs such as “speak,” “think,” “write,” “read,” and “present” were closely connected with English-related terms. These patterns suggest that successful experiences in using English for authentic communication may have strengthened students’ sense of self-efficacy and encouraged more proactive attitudes toward language learning.

Proactiveness in Intercultural Exchange

Student comments such as “it was fun,” “it was refreshing,” “I want to participate in similar exchanges again,” and “I want to speak up more” were frequently observed in reflections related to the Roundtable Exchange and Photo Language activities. These responses suggest that students experienced positive emotions toward intercultural encounters and developed a stronger willingness to engage in future intercultural exchanges.

Text-mining analysis also showed a frequent occurrence and strong co-occurrence of the words “exchange” and “fun.” This pattern indicates that direct interaction with the Mongolian trainees helped lower psychological barriers and encouraged students to engage more proactively in intercultural communication.

Understanding of Diversity and Coexistence

Through activities such as Photo Language, MINPACK, and self-introduction exchanges, students expressed comments such as “we could share various ideas with each other,” “it felt like a space different from Japan,” and “I understood cultural differences.” These responses suggest that students became more aware of the existence of diverse cultures and values and began to develop attitudes of acceptance toward them.

In addition, frequent references to group work and collaborative activities indicate that working together with peers from different backgrounds provided students with opportunities to recognize the importance of cooperation in a multicultural and coexisting society.

The observed deepening of intercultural understanding and the positive shifts in students’ attitudes toward English may be related to the instructional approach adopted in this program, which emphasized lesson design that respected students’ autonomy rather than direct knowledge transmission. For example, students’ active communication during the Roundtable Exchange and their increased willingness to express themselves in the One-Minute Speech suggest that authentic communicative experiences helped them gain confidence and a sense of success in using English. These experiences appear to have promoted deeper engagement than traditional teacher-centered instruction.

Furthermore, by adopting a facilitative role—encouraging students to think independently, allowing time for responses, and providing supportive guidance—the teacher created an environment in which students could challenge themselves without fear of failure, collaborate with peers, and develop problem-solving skills. This suggests that learner-centered lesson design can play an important role in enhancing students’ motivation and the quality of their learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This study examined the educational impact of a community-based intercultural program involving foreign technical intern trainees on Japanese high school students’ intercultural understanding and attitudes toward English use. The findings suggest that the program contributed to fostering more positive attitudes toward using English, deeper intercultural understanding, and more proactive engagement in intercultural exchange, even though students continued to recognize the challenges associated with English communication.

The results highlight the potential of community-based intercultural learning in regions where opportunities for direct interaction with foreign residents are limited. By engaging students in participatory activities such as the Roundtable Exchange and collaborative tasks, the program provided authentic communicative experiences that supported students’ motivation and confidence in using English. The instructional approach, which emphasized student autonomy and the teacher’s role as a facilitator, appears to have played an important role in encouraging active learning and intercultural awareness. This study also contributes to the literature by demonstrating how collaboration with foreign residents in local communities can function as a practical model for intercultural education in regional high schools.

Although the overall quantitative results did not show statistically significant differences, several individual items demonstrated significant improvements with medium effect sizes. When considered alongside the qualitative findings derived from reflection data and text-

mining analysis, these results suggest that the program contributed to meaningful changes in students' attitudes toward intercultural communication and English learning.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. Because the study relied primarily on post-activity reflections and questionnaire data, it was not possible to fully examine long-term changes in students' attitudes or learning retention. Future research should therefore incorporate follow-up surveys, interviews, and additional performance-based assessments in order to capture longer-term learning outcomes. In addition, because the study employed a single-group pre-post design without a control group, caution is required when interpreting causal relationships between the intervention and the observed changes. It will also be important to consider variations in participation, including students who were absent from certain activities.

Future studies may also explore comparative implementations across different regions or age groups and examine how intercultural exchange programs can be integrated with inquiry-based learning in other subjects. Through continued practice and further empirical investigation, such efforts may contribute to the development of sustainable educational models that connect schools with local communities and promote intercultural understanding in increasingly diverse societies.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

AI-assisted technologies, including DeepL Write for translation, were used to support the writing process. All translations were reviewed and revised by the authors to ensure accuracy and appropriateness.

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