Article

# Fostering Interculturality through Near-Peer Role Models in Japanese University Classroom Settings

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**ABSTRACT:** *This qualitative research examines how near-peer role model (NPRM)-driven intercultural interactions influence the basic psychological needs (BPNs) of both domestic and international students in increasingly diverse Japanese academic environments. The study employs an open-ended survey administered to students enrolled in the same program for 1 year. The data are further supplemented by observation notes to provide additional insights into the effectiveness of these practices. The findings suggest that NPRM-based approaches can effectively enhance students' integration, engagement, and sense of belonging in multicultural classroom settings. Hence, future research should examine the long-term impact of NPRM-based approaches across diverse academic contexts and how cultural, institutional, and individual factors shape their effectiveness in supporting students' well-being and academic success.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A near-peer role model is someone we look up to who may be similar to us in various ways, including cultural or social background, age, or interests. Near-peer role modeling (NPRM) emphasizes the positive impact of such relatable role models on learning, self-efficacy, and psychoemotional wellbeing. Two recent studies by Hooper et al. (2025) and Hooper (2025) highlighted ways in which NPRM may be integrated into English classes and highlighted the potential benefits of this approach in Japan. Hooper et al. (2025) reported that NPRM can positively contribute to the satisfaction of Japanese university students' needs for autonomy and relatedness in the classroom. Through NPRM, students engage with relatable role models, gaining new in-class and out-of-class language learning strategies while also building trusting learning partnerships. Hooper (2025) employed a video-based classroom intervention to investigate how NPRM can serve as a transitional resource for first-year university students transitioning to a markedly different educational ideology (i.e., communicative vs. test-focused instruction). Student responses to NPRM videos indicated that these peer role models scaffolded students' transitions by representing attainable but impressive linguistic and behavioral targets, offering practical advice, and providing a sense of time orientation and perspective during times of uncertainty and upheaval.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A sub-theory of self-determination theory (SDT), BPNT, posits that the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness, and competence—is essential for human motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Studies have shown that satisfying these needs supports intrinsic motivation and learner engagement, whereas need frustration can undermine achievement. Recent research, much of which has been conducted in Japanese EFL classrooms, underscores the role of peer influence in fulfilling these needs (see Figure 1).



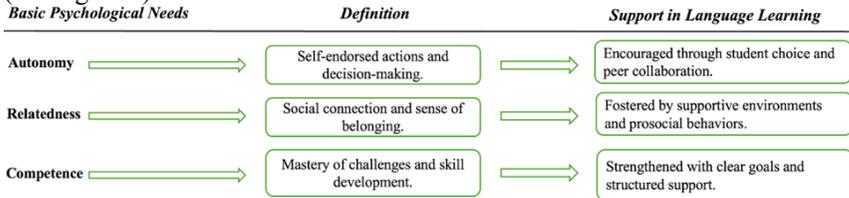| Basic Psychological Needs | Definition | Support in Language Learning |
|---|---|---|
| Autonomy | Self-endorsed actions and decision-making. | Encouraged through student choice and peer collaboration. |
| Relatedness | Social connection and sense of belonging. | Fostered by supportive environments and prosocial behaviors. |
| Competence | Mastery of challenges and skill development. | Strengthened with clear goals and structured support. |

**Figure 1: BPN and Pedagogical Implications from Language Learning Research**

Sense of belonging refers to the feeling of being accepted, valued, and connected within a group, community, or environment. It involves feeling recognized, supported, and included rather than isolated or out of place (Hagerty et al., 2002). Hagerty et al. (2002) identified two key attributes of a sense of belonging: *valued involvement*, which refers to feeling appreciated and needed, and *fit*, the perception that one's characteristics align with those of the surrounding environment.

In this study, we defined a sense of belonging in practical terms by examining students' expressions of valued involvement (feeling appreciated and recognized for contributions) and fit (feeling that their cultural backgrounds were understood and accepted) through their reported experiences in NPRM-driven activities. Specifically, we identified valued involvement when students described feeling appreciated, needed, or recognized for their contributions and fit when they reported that their cultural backgrounds and perspectives were understood and accepted in the classroom.

In a multicultural classroom, it is essential that both domestic and international students feel that their contributions are valued and that their cultural backgrounds are understood and appreciated. When these needs are met, students are more likely to feel integrated into the community, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging (Egitim & Harumi, 2025). In educational settings, a strong sense of belonging enhances motivation, well-being, and academic success, whereas its absence can lead to disengagement, loneliness, and increased stress (Hsieh & Watson, 2025; Yeh et al., 2022). However, belonging extends beyond mere social interaction; encounters with indifferent or unsupportive individuals do little to satisfy students' need for belonging (Glass et al., 2015). Hence, NPRM has the potential to enhance students' sense of belonging by fostering mutual support and collaboration within multicultural classroom settings.

To date, no studies have examined the role of NPRM in influencing the sense of belonging among domestic and international students in Japanese academic settings. This gap is significant given that established intercultural learning frameworks, such as Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model, offer valuable theoretical grounding for understanding how NPRM can be utilized in diverse academic environments. Within this framework, we illustrate how NPRM-driven activities develop students' attitudes (e.g., respect and openness), knowledge (e.g., cultural self-awareness and culture-specific knowledge), and skills (e.g., listening and empathy) that contribute to their sense of belonging in multicultural settings. Contemporary Japanese higher education can be considered a potentially valuable research setting because of the recent push for increased university enrollment among international students. Furthermore, English–medium education in Japan has historically been influenced by ideologies such as native speakerism, which may disempower Japanese students and hamper their motivation to engage with non-Western international language learners. From this perspective, we examine how NPRM can facilitate students' integration and sense of belonging in a multicultural academic setting. The research question we investigate is "How do NPRM-driven intercultural activities

influence domestic and international students' sense of belonging in multicultural academic settings at Japanese universities?"

## METHOD

This qualitative study examined NPRM-oriented instruction implemented over one year in a global competence seminar. We employed purposive sampling, selecting participants based on informed judgment. Initially, we chose students who had studied together in a global competence seminar for over a year under NPRM-oriented instruction, as this was expected to yield rich and relevant data. NPRM-oriented instruction emphasized group discussions, pair work, peer presentations, peer feedback, peer evaluation, and collaborative group projects to increase students' global and intercultural competence.

### Data collection

Data collection involved an open-ended survey administered via Google Forms to 7 domestic and international students (see Table 1). In accordance with ethical guidelines, we obtained written informed consent, ensuring that participants understood the study's purpose, procedures, and rights, including the option to withdraw at any time, although all chose to remain. To protect confidentiality, we assured participants that their personal information would not be disclosed. Finally, all raw data were securely destroyed upon completion of the analysis.

**Table 1: Participant Information**

|  | Age | Gender | Nationality | Major | English Ability | Other Languages |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | 21 | Female | Philippines | Global and Regional Studies | CEFR C2 | Japanese, Tagalog |
| Participant 2 | 24 | Female | Vietnam | Global and Regional Studies | CEFR C1 | Japanese, Vietnamese |
| Participant 3 | 21 | Male | China | Global and Regional Studies | CEFR C1 | Japanese, Mandarin |
| Participant 4 | 20 | Male | Japan | Global and Regional Studies | CEFR C1 | Japanese, Mandarin |
| Participant 5 | 22 | Female | Japan | Global and Regional Studies | CEFR C1 | Japanese |
| Participant 6 | 20 | Female | Japan | Global and Regional Studies | CEFR C1 | Japanese, Mandarin |
| Participant 7 | 21 | Female | Japan | Global and Regional Studies | CEFR C1 | Japanese |

Although the sample size (n=7) in this study was limited, even given its qualitative nature, numerous factors enabled us to achieve data saturation in this case. First, our adoption of an established theoretical framework (SDT/BPNs) allowed us to focus our study more than with a purely inductive approach. Furthermore, Soyhan's established relationship with the participants in the global competence seminar, along with his ability to observe them over time, made them more willing to share detailed insights. Additionally, he analyzed their stated beliefs and opinions in relation to their in-class behaviors. The inclusion criteria were as follows: being a university student, regularly engaging in intercultural contact in the classroom, and possessing English proficiency at CEFR C1 level or higher. However, it must also be noted that the deeply hierarchical nature of the education system in Japan and the clear power gap between teachers/researchers and students are likely to have influenced what participants related and how they related their experiences in this class. With that caveat in mind, however, based on the above factors and our reflective discussions on the degree of saturation in our coded data, we determined that this limited dataset demonstrated sufficient "information power" (Malterud et al., 2016) to adequately address our research question.

**Data Analysis**

We utilized reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which emphasizes an iterative, reflective process in which researchers actively shape the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; see Figure 2).
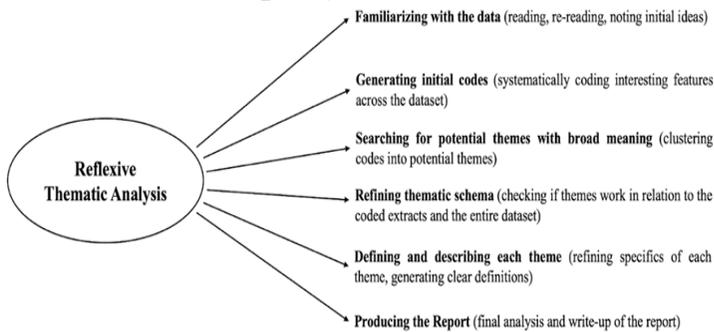


**Figure 2: Reflexive thematic analysis procedure**

An RTA approach emphasizes the value of subjectivity in qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Accordingly, in this study, we viewed our subjectivity as multicultural university educators in Japan as an asset that enriched our interpretation of the data, rather than adopting a positivist or quantitative stance that frames it as "bias" to be minimized in the pursuit of an objective "truth." Therefore, upon multiple re-readings of our data, we engaged in deductive coding based on BPN satisfaction or frustration and the development of themes, through a collaborative and dialogic analysis. In line with an RTA approach, these discussions were conducted not to eliminate bias or subjectivity, but rather to

"enhance understanding, interpretation, and reflexivity" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 8) and to challenge personal or cultural assumptions.

## FINDINGS

Based on our hybrid deductive–inductive thematic analysis, we identified two key areas in which NPRM-driven classroom activities had the greatest impact on student experience: competence satisfaction and relatedness satisfaction.

## Competence Satisfaction

"Collaboration and cooperation" was noted as a key concept in this multicultural classroom setting (32 references). Both international and domestic students emphasized that, in interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds, a wide range of differing opinions and perspectives could be shared freely, with each one affording respect. The learning environment, based on open exchange and peer mentorship, in turn, appeared to help students feel that their individual and cultural perspectives were viewed as positive contributions by their peers, aligning with the dimensions of respect and openness (Deardorff, 2006). As Participant 6 noted, "[their] presence was accepted by those around [them] and [their] views were respected." Furthermore, the acceptance of diverse individual perspectives contributed to positive group dynamics and collective efficacy (20 references), reflecting Deardorff's (2006) skills of listening and empathy. Through their active and open intercultural interactions, participants felt that the learning environment had "positive energy that helps [them] move forward" (Participant 3) and experienced a sense of achievement by "enjoy[ing] the process of creating something together" (Participant 4).

Additionally, peer mentorship through group and pair activities helped students feel connected and valued, promoting further participation and confidence. For example, receiving "constructive feedback" from peers and collaboratively working through "challenges" strengthened their sense of belonging and motivation to engage in NPRM-based activities. The notion of competence as "effective or competent engagement in *useful activities*" [emphasis added] (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 253) was reinforced by participants (14 references). Participant 5 highlighted that "respecting different cultural perspectives" and "taking advantage of each other's strengths" would be valuable skills throughout their future learning. Consequently, NPRM-focused activities were seen as "a powerful way to develop both professionally and personally," as students "prepared for life as a young adult outside of school" (Participant 6).

## Relatedness Satisfaction

The collaborative environment also appeared to serve as a source of social connectedness, reflective of cultural self-awareness (Deardorff, 2006). Within the classroom itself, the participants noted that the respect displayed toward diverse cultural perspectives and identities helped enhance their sense of belonging (24

references). This felt "more like a shared experience than just a class" (Participant 7), reducing feelings of isolation and helping the students feel more "at home" (Participant 6), which made it easier for them to express their multicultural and multifaceted identities. The positive impact of these group dynamics extended beyond the classroom and made university life more fulfilling and meaningful through their perceived sense of belonging and a stronger "attachment to the university" (Participant 6).

Furthermore, within NPRM activities, participants perceived diversity as the norm rather than the exception (32 references). Their ideas were validated regardless of cultural background. NPRM-based instruction encouraged a positive cycle: reduced hesitation to share opinions led to more frequent peer interactions, which deepened relationships and built trust, demonstrating the integrated nature of Deardorff's (2006) framework dimensions. This process appeared particularly important for both domestic and international students adjusting to a multicultural classroom, as some (13 references) were "not yet accustomed to the environment and relationships" and felt "anxious and lonely" (Participant 5). Therefore, an intersection between competence and relatedness satisfaction can be observed, as a sense of belonging and emotional support are linked to increased confidence in facing new challenges and being "inspire[d to do something] that you'd never find yourself doing" (Participant 3).

Although it did not feature as a central theme in our analysis, the role of autonomy satisfaction must be discussed in relation to how it facilitates the satisfaction of competence and relatedness. The NPRM-oriented activities our participants engaged in were autonomy-supportive, as the students determined how projects were to be completed and the topics that served as the projects' foci. This space for volitional action gave them ample opportunities to develop skills, such as intercultural communication or role allocation, that they deemed valuable and to form meaningful interpersonal relationships without interference from the course instructor. This is consistent with Ryan and Deci's (2017) assertion that autonomy plays a crucial role in creating conditions in which competence or relatedness satisfaction is more likely to occur.

## CONCLUSIONS

This brief report explores the role of NPRM-based instruction in fostering student integration, engagement, and a sense of belonging through the lens of competence and relatedness satisfaction in a multicultural classroom. The findings suggest that NPRM-based activities promote intercultural communication and respect for diverse perspectives while also enhancing acceptance and positive group dynamics. Peer mentorship emerged as a key factor in building confidence, encouraging engagement, strengthening a sense of belonging, and supporting intercultural learning among both international and domestic students. We therefore recommend incorporating structured peer mentorship into group and pair activities, such as peer feedback, peer assessment of presentations and term papers, and collaborative reflection sessions (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Furthermore, designing and integrating activities that emphasize global and intercultural competence can help leverage the diverse strengths that students bring to the classroom. These activities not only support professional and personal development but also prepare students for real-world challenges beyond university (Egitim & Harumi, 2025). For example, intercultural dialog circles, where students share personal experiences and cultural perspectives, can deepen mutual understanding and promote empathy. Recognizing diversity as a norm and ensuring that all voices are heard can also be empowering. Such practices foster positive group dynamics, collective efficacy, and psychological safety, which are key elements for effective learning and social integration.

Future research can build on this study by examining how peer mentorship specifically influences students' transition experiences in multicultural school settings, particularly its role in alleviating anxiety and loneliness. Students' prior intercultural exposure may influence their perceived sense of belonging. Hence, longitudinal studies could examine how competence and relatedness satisfaction develop over time and how these processes affect academic outcomes, motivation, and overall well-being. Although autonomy satisfaction did appear in the interview data (12 references), the scope of this short research summary does not allow us to discuss this in detail. We posited that the highly autonomous nature of most of the seminar activities that participants engaged in meant that they viewed this as a given characteristic of the environment and, therefore, did not comment on it directly. This topic also warrants further investigation in future studies. Finally, investigating the impact of different types of feedback and mentorship approaches may offer more nuanced insights for educators striving to create supportive and inclusive learning environments. Continued research in this area can ultimately inform better policies and practices that promote student success in Japan's increasingly diverse academic contexts.

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