



Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 8 (2026), pp. 47-66
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/q82gq444>



Enhancing the Cultural Awareness of Japanese Students through Virtual Exchange: Providing Diverse, Inclusive, and Equitable Education

Yoko Matsumoto
Monash University

ABSTRACT: *The use of online platforms to foster intercultural competence has become increasingly important within higher education, particularly in the context of Internationalization at Home and Internationalization at a Distance. This paper examines Project Ibunka, a subject-specific virtual exchange program that connects Japanese university students with peers in multiple countries through asynchronous, essay-based written exchanges on politically and socially sensitive issues. Using a mixed-methods design, the study employed the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) alongside follow-up semistructured interviews. The quantitative analysis indicated a significant increase in participants' metacognitive cultural intelligence. The qualitative findings further suggest that engagement with firsthand narratives and sustained written dialogue encouraged participants to reflect critically on their assumptions, perspectives, and social positioning. The findings demonstrate that asynchronous written virtual exchange can create "safe/brave" spaces that reduce linguistic and psychological barriers and support reflective intercultural learning, highlighting its value as an inclusive approach to developing intercultural competence.*

Keywords: 5-8 words alphabetically, separated by commas

Received: June 30, 2025 | **Revised:** Dec 16, 2025 | **Accepted:** Jan 15, 2026

Academic Editor: Dr. Doris Zhang, University of Tokyo, Japan

Academic Committee: Dr. Yujin Yaguchi | Dr. Yuki Ohara | Dr. Kimberly A. Noels | Dr. Rui Zhang

INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by rapid technological change, increasing global interconnectedness, and heightened attention to social and environmental challenges, intercultural competence programs in higher education have never been more important. In this context, concepts such as Internationalization at Home (IaH) and Internationalization at a Distance (IaD) offer new possibilities for students and for institutions to provide such learning opportunities. IaH, for example, is defined as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students, within domestic learning environments” (Beelen & Jones, 2015.p.12). IaD, on the other hand, refers to “forms of education across borders where students, staff, and institutional provisions are separated by geographic distance and supported by technology” ((Mittelmeier et al., 2021.p.269).

In 2023, after the COVID-19 pandemic, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched a 10-year post-pandemic internationalization strategy aiming to increase the number of international students from 300,000 in 2019 to 400,000 by 2033 and to increase the number of Japanese students studying abroad from 222,000 in 2019 to 500,000 by 2033 (Goh et al., 2024)The increased number indicates growing opportunities for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to interact with each other. Students also need qualities, generally called intercultural competence, which have been comprehensively defined as the ability to function effectively in intercultural settings (Deardorff, 2006). However, MEXT’s initiatives or policies seem to lack this aspect (Watanabe, 2025)

While government initiatives have tended to emphasize the achievement of numerical targets, practitioners at the institutional level have increasingly focused on meeting these targets in ways that also ensure qualitative improvement (Horie, 2002). At the practical level, many scholars have advocated harnessing digital technology to connect learners by providing online intercultural learning opportunities and developing intercultural competence via a pedagogical approach called “virtual exchange” (Belz, 2003; Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Hagley, 2020; Lewis & O’Dowd, 2016; White et al., 2021).

Virtual exchange is an umbrella term that defines educational practices or approaches that use online technologies to bring together students situated in different geographical locations and/or from different cultural backgrounds to foster intercultural and/or interdisciplinary learning through sustained interaction and collaboration with distant pairs (Helm, 2024; O’Dowd, 2023). Virtual exchange is often discussed differently from collaborative online intercultural learning (COIL). COIL typically follows a shared-style approach, in which partnerships are built on existing bilateral institutional agreements and instructors collaboratively design and implement common assignments or projects (O’Dowd, 2021). In contrast, virtual exchange is commonly described as a subject-specific approach that is usually instructor-led and aims to develop foreign language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence (O’Dowd, 2021). The

present paper examines such a subject-specific virtual exchange program that has the potential to provide a formative, inclusive and equitable learning environment.

The development of intercultural competence through virtual exchange aligns closely with several sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly those concerned with education and equity. SGD 4 suggests that promoting intercultural competence can lead to a deeper appreciation of diverse cultures and a more inclusive learning environment. By harnessing online technologies, the equity issues associated with physical mobility are reduced. According to UNESCO, only 2.6% of the global population currently engages in international mobility (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). In Japan, although approximately three million students are enrolled in higher education, only 89179 commenced studying abroad in 2023 (Ministry of Education, Cultures, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 2025), accounting for approximately 3% of the total. Previous research has identified multiple barriers to mobility among Japanese students, including academic eligibility requirements (e.g., minimum GPA), low foreign language proficiency, family responsibilities, low SES, schedule misalignment between Japanese and overseas academic calendars, and institution-specific selection processes (Grimes-MacLellan 1, 2017). A major structural constraint is Japan's rigid and formalized job-hunting process (*shushoku katsudou*; 就職活動), which begins in the third year of university and involves a prolonged series of seminars, tests, and interviews (Malcom, 2019). As a result, many students feel unable to exercise their physical mobility (through international travel) once this process begins.

While virtual exchange facilitates an inclusive approach to intercultural education, there are also counterarguments that it can exclude students from successful intercultural learning experiences in many ways (Breaden et al., 2025; O'Dowd, 2025). Common challenges include unequal access to reliable internet, varying levels of English proficiency, and limited institutional and curricular flexibility (Hagley & Yunita, 2025). Another concern arises when connecting two geographic locations, often situated in the Global North and Global South, as the design of connecting those areas itself can unintentionally reproduce equity issues. As Wimpenny et al., (2022) argue, such configurations may reinforce existing structural imbalances between partners. Nevertheless, when designed and implemented with care, virtual exchange can promote a more inclusive and equitable approach to intercultural learning, mitigating many of the challenges.

This paper examines a virtual exchange program, Project Ibunka, which engages students in online written discussions and aims to foster diversity by connecting Japanese classrooms with the wider world while promoting equity through inclusive online participation. A distinctive feature of the program is its use of essay-based discussions on political and socially sensitive issues, such as the territorial dispute between Japan and South Korea, the war in Ukraine, and the experiences of World War II survivors. This context connects with SDG 10: Reduced inequality, as developing intercultural competence through the discussion of political issues in culturally diverse settings can help breakdown stereotypes and prejudice and promote mutual respect.

This study is based on a PhD project that investigates four distinct virtual exchange programs. The aim of this study is to outline the outcomes of the Project Ibunka program and, on the basis of these findings, to describe the design implications for virtual exchange programs that foster intercultural competence among Japanese university students. In doing so, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Which dimensions of intercultural competence, as measured by the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), significantly increase following participation in a virtual exchange program?
2. What are the implications of these findings for designing virtual exchange programs aimed at developing intercultural competence for Japanese participants?

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is theoretically grounded in Byram's intercultural communicative competence model (Byram, 1997), which has been extensively used to examine intercultural learning in foreign language education contexts. Byram, (2020) emphasized the notion of an intercultural speaker, which requires both intercultural competence and communicative competence. This perspective is closely linked to citizenship education, where the goal is to prepare learners not only to communicate across languages and cultures but also to participate actively in democratic societies beyond national borders. Building on Byram's work, more inclusive definitions of intercultural competence have recently been proposed by Barrett & Borghetti, (2025). They define intercultural competence as the ability to (1) understand and respect others who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself; (2) respond appropriately, effectively, and respectfully in intercultural interactions and to build positive and constructive relationships; (3) critically reflect on one's own cultural affiliations and identity through encounters with cultural difference; and (4) take action, individually or collectively, to promote and defend human dignity and rights, particularly when these are threatened owing to perceived cultural differences (p.95). These definitions emphasize not only effective and appropriate communication but also respectful engagement and ethical responsibility in intercultural contexts.

To enhance intercultural competence in Japanese contexts, some scholars (Munezane, 2021; Watanabe, 2020a) have advocated incorporating conflict resolution approaches to develop intercultural understanding. In this context, the conflict resolution approach is defined as a formal or informal process that seeks a peaceful resolution to a dispute among two or more opposing parties (Watanabe, 2020a). The approach highlights that when contradictions or tensions arise, individuals with critical cultural awareness are able to engage in objective and calm dialog aimed at resolving those conflicts (Munezane, 2021). While (Byram, 2020) does not explicitly frame intercultural competence in terms of conflict resolution, he emphasizes the role of the intercultural person as a mediator who facilitates dialog across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

In implementing the conflict resolution approach, (Watanabe, 2020b) suggested that teachers should (1) ensure freedom of expression so that students can express any messages that they wish to without too much consideration of others, (2) democratize the learning environment, allowing students to make decisions through discussion, (3) encourage students to consider win-win types of resolution that satisfy the basic human needs of all participants, and (4) form a consensus about conflict resolution in advance. Project Ibunka's designer used these points as a reference when the project's design and implementation.

OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

This study used (Earley & Ang, 2003) CQS, a self-inventory instrument, to comprehend how participants' intercultural competence evolved over time. The CQS includes a 20-item questionnaire based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree to rate the participants' answers to the 20 statements. Each one-item scale captures a metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral description of the participants. More specifically, CQS scores predict cross-cultural judgment and decision-making, general and interactional adjustment and well-being, task performance in a problem-solving simulation, and work performance (Ang et al., 2007). The CQS is designed to describe respondents' development of intercultural competence regardless of their cultural background (Ang et al., 2007). Since its inception, studies have validated the CQS in various countries, including China, the Netherlands, Poland, Italy and South Korea, in addition to the initially tested countries, namely, the United States and Singapore (K. T. Wang & Goh, 2020). Consequently, the CQS has evolved into a validated assessment tool, and it has been shown to have the most promising evidence for assessing intercultural competence (Leung et al., 2014; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013).

THE STUDY

This section provides details of the program examined in this study, introduces the participants, outlines the methodologies, and describes the analytical approach used for the collected data.

Virtual Exchange Program

This study examined Project Ibunka 2023 to investigate the virtual exchange experiences of Japanese university students. Project Ibunka is a web-based essay posting an intercultural exchange program designed to promote authentic English communication and intercultural understanding among English language learners. This program was integrated into the syllabus of an English writing and intercultural understanding course at a major National University in Japan. The partner participants in Project Ibunka in 2023 included university students from Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Ukraine. Table 1 shows the number of participants in Project Ibunka.

Table 1
Number of Participants in Project Ibunka 2023

Country	Number of Participants
Brazil	27
Indonesia	105
Japan	44
South Korea	5
Taiwan	15
Ukraine	138
Total	334

Unlike typical English essay courses in Japan, where students primarily write for their teachers, Project Ibunka encourages students to write essays on given topics for a broader, international audience. The participants also read and respond to essays written by their peers, creating a platform for dialog through written texts. Project Ibunka was conducted as an assignment that students are expected to complete as part of an English writing task and involves exchanging essays of various topics via an online bulletin board.

The 2023 iteration of Project Ibunka ran over 12 weeks and consisted of five phases:

1) School life (Sept. 25 - Oct. 22)

Every partner school hosts a bulletin board. First, students who host the board with their school's name post introductory messages about their school life and invite comments from other partner students. This phase allows postings of 200 or more words and comments with 150 or more words.

2) Cultures (Oct. 23 - Nov. 19)

Students discuss various aspects of their own domestic cultures, such as festivals and special events, food culture, fashion, entertainment, etc. This phase allows postings of 300 or more words and comments with 150 or more words.

3) Social issues - world peace (Nov. 20 - Dec. 22)

Students discuss various domestic and international issues, such as juvenile crime, environmental issues, educational issues, and regional conflicts around the world. This phase allows posts of 400 or more words and comments with 150 or more words.

4) Special work for commemorating the project (Nov. 20 - Dec. 22)

Students create three- to five-minute video clips and upload them onto shared cloud storage.

5) Project Ibunka 2023, the final official zoom session; Dec. 16,

Each phase was designed to promote a deeper understanding of global perspectives. For example, during the "social issues and world peace" phase, Japanese students shared essays discussing global conflicts, including the war in Ukraine.

To promote respectful dialog practices, the coordinator drew on Kajitani, (2018) Eight Rules of Philosophical Dialog. These rules include the following: (1)

anything can be said; (2) negative attitudes toward others' statements should be avoided; (3) listening without speaking is acceptable; (4) participants should ask one another questions; (5) contributions should be grounded in personal experience as well as knowledge; (6) incoherent speech is permitted; (7) it is acceptable to change one's opinion; and (8) it is acceptable to lose one's prior understanding. These ground rules were established by the coordinator prior to participants' engagement in Project Ibunka.

Selection of Participants

The participants were recruited on the conditions that they were Japanese university students, all of whom were over 18 years old, had completed the mandatory six or eight years of English education mostly started in the 5th grade of elementary school (age 10), and who are currently enrolled in the 4-year university located in Japan. For this study, a total of 36 students from Japanese universities completed the presurvey, while 22 students also responded to the postsurvey, which resulted in 22 valid paired samples. Among 22 participants, three proceeded to the follow-up interview. Among the 34 students from Project Ibunka who responded to the survey, five (14.71%) reported having prior experience studying abroad. Among these students, two had experiences lasting one week, two had experiences lasting two weeks, and one had studied abroad for three weeks. In other words, all had experiences that lasted less than one month. All interview participants were undergraduates from the Faculty of Science and Engineering, for whom this English course was a required subject. None of the interview participants had experience studying abroad in the past, and their English proficiency level was assessed as B1--B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Research Design

This study (Project ID: 34559) received approval from the Human Ethics Committee of the author's affiliated institution. Data were obtained from pre- and postonline surveys carried out at the beginning and end of the virtual exchange program in September and December 2023. To protect the participants' privacy, the participants used pseudonyms or other personal means of identification. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their inclusion in the research project.

This study employed a mixed-methods approach in which both quantitative and qualitative data from the pre- and postsurveys were used and semistructured interviews were conducted. The survey was designed to assess intercultural competence in a measurable manner, with the semistructured interview being designed to explore shared patterns or perspectives more easily, thus complementing the analysis.

The CQS was used to explore what aspects of cultural intelligence (CQ) changed quantitatively after participation in Project Ibunka. To ensure that the participants understood the questions, the questionnaire was provided in the Japanese language (Soga, 2020). The pre-CQS included background questions, with the actual CQS taking approximately 10 minutes to complete. The post-CQS

replicated the pre-CQS. Survey links were distributed via the program coordinator to students enrolled in English classes. Participants who completed both and consented were invited to individual interviews, which were conducted within two weeks of the program's completion.

For qualitative data, semistructured interviews were used. The purpose of the audio-recorded semistructured interviews was to explore in-depth the participants' virtual exchange experiences. In addition, the form of interview allows participants to use their own words and gives the interviewer an opportunity to explore participants' thoughts while delving deeply into their learning experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview included ten questions that aimed to determine the students' perspectives in reference to what they had learned through the virtual exchange program. The interviews were conducted in the Japanese language either in person or via Zoom for no more than 60 minutes, and all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. For interview transcription, Amazon Transcribe on Amazon Web Services (AWS) was utilized. AWS is an automatic speech recognition (ASR) service that converts spoken language into written text and makes it suitable for transcribing interview data. Although an automatic speech recognition service can provide efficient transcription, the transcribed data still need to be reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy. Hence, the transcripts were carefully checked and reviewed by the first author and another Japanese researcher to ensure that the translations were valid.

Data analysis

To determine whether there were changes in students' CQS metacognitive, cognitive, behavioral, and motivational dimensions over time, it was appropriate to evaluate groups of paired samples. Hence, only the data of participants who responded to both the pre-CQS and post-CQS questionnaires were used. The CQS data were exported to SPSS 29 to assess normality and guide the selection of either a parametric or nonparametric test for analysis. Maeda (2004) discussion on statistical approaches informed the choice of analytical test.

For the interview data, thematic analysis was conducted. Thematic analysis is defined as 'a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insights into patterns of meaning across a data set' (Braun et al., 2012, p.57). It enables researchers to capture shared meanings and experiences (Braun et al., 2012). In intercultural research, emerging themes provide 'descriptive evidence of students' intercultural development' (Y. Wang & Kulich, 2015, p.45). Given the aims of this study, thematic analysis offered a particularly suitable and effective approach for examining qualitative data.

FINDINGS

Statistical analysis of the CQS results

The quantitative data were analyzed according to the nature of the CQS data. In this study, the nonparametric Wilcoxon signed rank test was used. The Wilcoxon analyses of the survey data from 22 Japanese participants in Project Ibunka 2023 revealed a significant increase in participants' metacognitive CQ. Metacognitive

CQ is defined as “an individual’s cultural consciousness through cross-cultural interaction” (Ang & Dyne, 2008, p.5). Individuals with strong metacognitive CQ critically examine their own assumptions and reflect on and adapt their cultural knowledge (Ang & Dyne, 2008). It comprises the following subdimensions: (1) planning and preparing before cultural interaction; (2) awareness and monitoring of cultural influences during interactions; and (3) checking, revising and adapting one’s assumptions. The CQS results suggest that participation in virtual exchange through online written discussions may facilitate growth in participants’ awareness and their ability to reflect on and adjust underlying assumptions. No statistically significant changes were observed in the other dimensions according to the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. However, the mean score comparisons revealed a nonsignificant increase in metacognitive CQ and cognitive CQ, whereas motivational CQ and behavioral CQ decreased.

Despite slight decreases in the motivational and behavioral CQ dimensions, all three interview participants expressed positive attitudes toward continuing intercultural learning and acquiring knowledge of global and political issues. For example, Interview Participant 2 (P2) expressed a strong interest in pursuing physical mobility experiences, such as studying abroad, whereas Interview Participant 3 (P3) indicated that he was encouraged to participate in an exchange club with international students. These findings suggest that online written exchanges have the potential to promote increased interest in intercultural situations. Table 2 presents the results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests.

Table 2

Results of the Wilcoxon signed rank tests (<0.05)*

Dimensions	Pre-Mean	Pre-SD	Post-Mean	Post-SD	p value
Metacognitive	4.77	0.922	5.41	0.908	0.002*
Cognitive	3.36	1.177	3.73	1.12	0.265
Motivational	4.23	1.378	4.18	1.181	0.792
Behavioral	5.23	0.922	5.14	0.771	0.66

Interview: variables related to the nature of the program

Three distinctive features of Project Ibunka were emphasized by the coordinator: (1) the inclusion of discussions on political issues; (2) the use of a written exchange format; and (3) the creation of a space for safe and open dialog. These design elements were reflected in the interview participants’ accounts, which illustrated how the program structure shaped their learning experiences.

Addressing political issues

In the interviews, most students referred to experiences of engaging with politically sensitive issues. These topics were described as emotionally

demanding and largely unfamiliar to many participants. However, the opportunity to connect with peers from different geopolitical contexts, such as Ukraine, made these discussions more personally meaningful. The participants reported that sharing personal perspectives and learning about the lived experiences of others fostered a sense of connection, which in turn elicited feelings of affinity and empathy. Participant 1 (P1) reflected on the strong emotional impact of interacting with Ukrainian students during the exchange.

War always felt like something happening far away, but hearing the reality that some people would still be alive if not for the war in Ukraine made me realize how real it is. Reading stories about specific individuals carried a weight that was completely different from information found online—it truly hit home. I want to remain humble and keep in mind that there is still so much I don't know. (P1)

For P1, it was difficult for her to connect with what has happened in Ukraine given the distance from her life in Japan. She expressed uncertainty about whether she was in a position to speak on the topic given that she was not directly experiencing it. However, by sharing essays about herself and reading in return the personal stories of war and conflict from the students in Ukraine, she was able to feel a closer bond with their lives, making their reality more concrete and tangible to her. In the above example, interactions with students from another culture caused her to experience a shift in her perspective and, as a result, to develop greater awareness of the limitations of her own perspective and experiences.

Another participant (P2) similarly emphasized how shared discussions cultivated a sense of connection and understanding:

It is impossible to understand how people in Ukraine truly feel through the news alone. Hearing their voices firsthand added depth and color to what I had learned from textbooks. Now, whenever news about Ukraine comes on, I find myself unconsciously paying closer attention. (P2)

For P2, participation in Project Ibunka enhanced awareness of global issues. This appeared to be facilitated by informational exchanges grounded in first-hand interactions with local students, which in turn cultivated a sense of connection. Unlike knowledge acquired from textbooks, these interactions enabled P2 to broaden its perspective on real-world issues.

While discussing political topics brings some beneficial outcomes, it also requires caution. Two participants (P1 and P3) described feelings of guilt associated with living relatively comfortable lives, drawing attention to the emotional complexity involved in recognizing one's own relative privilege. For example, P3, who interacted with students from Ukraine, reflected that sharing aspects of their own culture and receiving comments from others prompted an awareness that what was taken for granted in everyday life was not necessarily shared by other participants. As P3 noted,

By sharing my own culture and receiving comments from others, I realized that what I take for granted in my everyday life isn't necessarily the same for other participants. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on my own culture. (P3)

This reflection appeared to support increased awareness of the participants' own social and cultural positioning. P3 was challenged to reflect critically on personal perspectives and understandings of others. At the same time, such comparative reflection, particularly in exchanges involving participants from differently positioned contexts, may introduce sensitivities that require careful facilitation. An effective virtual learning environment therefore needs to both support and challenge students, enabling transformative re-examination and reframing of cultural assumptions and binary thinking (Akpovo et al., 2024).

Dialog-oriented essay exchange

The defining feature of Project Ibunka is its emphasis on writing and sharing essays as a primary mode of intercultural interaction. The interview participants consistently highlighted the written format as beneficial, particularly in reducing the psychological pressure associated with speaking English. This was articulated by P2, who described being mindful of how readers from different cultural backgrounds might interpret his essay. As P2 explained,

If this had been face-to-face, it would have been truly hard. In Japan, we don't truly practice speaking English at school, so I can't respond quickly. That's why I felt more comfortable looking things up beforehand and taking my time to edit what I wanted to say. (P2)

For P2, the opportunity to write allowed him to take time to organize their thoughts, choose appropriate expressions, and reflect on how their messages might be received by others. As a result, written essay exchange appeared to function as a steppingstone for participants who were less confident in their English proficiency. In fact, other interview participants expressed psychological pressure associated with speaking in English, which may hinder their level of engagement. In this sense, the written mode of exchange was perceived as beneficial, as it seemed to allow participants to engage in ways that were more aligned with their English proficiency and prior intercultural experience.

P2 further illustrates the challenges of discussing political issues in a foreign language, particularly when participants are uncertain about how their peers might perceive their views, especially in relation to unfamiliar topics. However, these challenges appeared to be mitigated through the use of the written format. P 2 stated:

Because of cultural differences, I was worried that there might be things I shouldn't say or ways of expressing myself that could be inappropriate.

Even if I did not mean anything negative, I often felt uncertain about how the other person might interpret what I said. (P2)

P2 expressed a particular concern regarding what he would say. He expressed that he was careful and selective with what he said. While creating safe space for discussion, creating “brave space” is as important (Helm, 2024). Brave place in this context is understood as enabling participants to leave their comfort zones and experience some challenges. With respect to the communicative challenges that Japanese students face in intercultural interactions, Sakamoto (2022) reported that self-expression in a foreign language is perceived as a major obstacle to Japanese university students’ development of intercultural competence. Particularly in Japan, where implicit expression is often valued, self-expression, particularly in explicit, direct forms, may be unfamiliar with or uncomfortable. Experiential written exchanges such as Project Ibunka provide space where participants can practice self-expression in a foreign language.

Space for open dialog with ground rules

In addition, creating a safe and supportive environment is especially impactful for Japanese students, who tend to be less accustomed to learning through dialog or discussion (Watanabe, 2020a). Within this context, the project set ground rules for essay exchanges, providing a supportive environment for students to share opinions and engage in dialog without fear of judgment. As a result, the interview participants reported that they felt accepted and comfortable among their peers, which made it easier for them to express themselves openly. P1 explained the importance of this supportive environment in facilitating discussion:

It felt that everyone could exchange opinions without receiving emotional or aggressive views, and everyone seemed accepted. There were many warm comments, and the atmosphere was very comfortable. (P1)

Because clear guidelines for the written exchange were provided in advance, P1 reported that she did not worry about being judged for her opinions. As a result, Project Ibunka was perceived as a welcoming environment that reduced psychological pressure. Discussing political issues is inherently challenging; thus, people tend to avoid such topics. However, as Horie (2025) suggested, creating a space of cooperation and nonjudgment encourages students to engage more openly in dialog. By fostering a respectful and safe environment, students can be enabled to engage in meaningful exchanges where both sides benefit and learn from each other. This respectful and safe environment is indeed a key requirement for intercultural competence development. In addition to providing guidance about having a dialog, in Project Ibunka, the coordinator lectured about some of the political issues in class so that students would have enough understanding of the topics. This structured virtual exchange seemed to work well for Japanese students.

DISCUSSION

This study conceptualizes virtual exchange as a diversity-oriented, equitable, and inclusive pedagogical approach to fostering intercultural competence. In response to the first research question—*which dimensions of intercultural competence, as measured by the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), are significantly enhanced following participation in a virtual exchange program?* The findings indicate that online written discussions of virtual exchange were particularly effective in developing metacognitive and cognitive cultural intelligence.

The enhancement of these dimensions can be attributed, in part, to the experiential nature of the exchange. Written engagement with first-hand accounts from Ukrainian students regarding the war had a strong emotional impact on Japanese participants and was perceived as qualitatively different from learning through conventional media. Addressing politically sensitive and complex issues requires structured facilitation and contextual support, prompting participants to critically reassess the scope and reliability of their prior knowledge. For some, geographical and psychological distance from the conflict initially generated uncertainty about how to engage in discussions when not directly affected. However, exposure to personal narratives rendered the realities of conflict more concrete and emotionally salient, fostering heightened awareness of the partial and situated nature of one's own perspectives. Project Ibunka thus functioned as a *safe/brave space* in which participants encountered diverse viewpoints under reduced psychological pressure. The written mode of interaction supported reflective engagement with sensitive topics and appeared to have contributed to gains in metacognitive awareness and cultural understanding.

In contrast, no significant increases were observed in motivational or behavioral cultural intelligence. The absence of change in behavioral CQ is unsurprising, given that this dimension primarily assesses observable communicative behaviors, whereas interaction in Project Ibunka was largely text-based. The slight decline observed in motivational CQ self-evaluations, however, warrants careful interpretation. The interview data suggest that participants' interest in intercultural engagement remained intact; rather, many students perceived intercultural interaction as distant from their everyday lives and immediate social contexts. Although gains were evident in the cognitive and metacognitive dimensions, the participants reported limited opportunities to enact or sustain intercultural engagement beyond the program. This lack of accessible spaces for "output" may have influenced how the students assessed their own motivation, as intercultural competence was not experienced as being readily actionable in daily life. From this perspective, a decrease in motivational self-evaluation does not indicate disengagement but instead reflects a structural gap between intercultural learning and opportunities for practice.

In response to the second research question—*What are the implications of these findings for designing virtual exchange programs aimed at developing intercultural competence for Japanese participants?* Several design-related insights emerged from both the student and teacher perspectives. In line with scholarship emphasizing the need for intentional pedagogical design (O'Dowd,

2018, 2021), a defining feature of Project Ibunka was the creation of a psychologically safe yet intellectually demanding brave space for engaging with sensitive political issues. The written and asynchronous format reduced the performance pressure commonly associated with spoken intercultural interaction, supporting participation among learners with limited confidence in English or discussion-based learning. These conditions likely contributed to the observed gains in metacognitive and cognitive CQ.

The interview data further highlighted the importance of structured pedagogical scaffolding, a core principle in effective virtual exchange design. Many participants reported limited prior experience with critical discussion, particularly in English. Japanese students' challenges in speaking English were reported by Yamada (2012) to include a lack of confidence in expressing their opinions, communication anxiety stemming from shyness, and hesitation to initiate interactions with others. However, structured guidance and facilitation to support students' engagement in dialogue were perceived as valuable. Consistent with O'Dowd, (2021) argument that virtual exchange requires explicit facilitation rather than the assumption that interaction alone will generate learning, the instructor incorporated *Kajitani's Eight Rules of Philosophical Dialog* (Watanabe, 2024) to establish shared norms for respectful and reflective engagement. The participants identified this structured sense of psychological safety as essential for sustaining participation when addressing politically and emotionally sensitive topics, echoing Helm et al., (2017) emphasis on facilitation as central to ethical and inclusive intercultural learning environments.

A further implication concerns the frequency and continuity of intercultural engagement. Findings from Research Question 1, together with interview data from students in the Faculty of Science and Engineering, revealed limited prior exposure to intercultural interaction. The slight decreases observed in motivational and behavioral CQ are therefore better understood not as disengagement but as reflecting the limited presence of intercultural contact in students' everyday contexts. This interpretation aligns with the virtual exchange literature, cautioning against treating virtual exchange as a one-off intervention and instead advocating for sustained or programmatic integration to support the development of motivation and behavioral competence over time (O'Dowd, 2021). In this sense, virtual exchange functions as a critical contact zone that compensates for structurally constrained opportunities for intercultural engagement.

Finally, the sustainability of virtual exchange depends on adequate teacher support and institutional collaboration. Japanese educators are accustomed to lecture-based interaction and often find it challenging to shift into a facilitative role (Horie, 2025). This challenge can be eased, however, when virtual exchange connects classrooms across institutions or regions and allows educators to collaborate. Prior virtual exchange research has highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary and international collaboration in supporting instructors' expanded roles (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Strengthening such collaboration is therefore essential for sustaining virtual exchange not only as an inclusive student

learning approach but also as a site of ongoing professional development for educators.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how asynchronous written virtual exchange focused on political issues can contribute to the development of intercultural competence. Project Ibunka, which connected Japanese students with students in different geographical regions, created a diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning environment. Through structured essay exchanges and careful facilitation by the coordinators, the project successfully established “safe/brave” spaces that fostered meaningful dialog among participants. In this sense, Project Ibunka aligns with the goals of SDG 4 (quality education) by providing more inclusive and equitable learning opportunities and supporting students’ development of intercultural competence. The design of the virtual exchange project examined in this paper connects with SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), as the discussion of political issues in culturally diverse settings encouraged participants to revisit their values and thoughts and helped to break down stereotypes and prejudice and to promote mutual respect.

This study is not without limitations. Although the Wilcoxon test is appropriate for small samples, the number of survey participants ($n < 30$) may have limited statistical power, making it difficult to detect subtle effects or generalize the findings broadly. Additionally, the small number of interview participants means that the perspectives captured may not fully represent the broader group. Future studies would benefit from larger and more balanced participant samples to validate and expand upon these findings.

REFERENCES

- Akpovo, S. M., Arndt, S., Marek Tesar, Cabral, M., Tucker, A., Huang, F., & Brar, M. S. (2024). An ethic of discomfort and intercultural otherness: Seeking unstable ground in the virtual classroom. In *Interculturality Online: Ideological Constructions and Considerations for Higher Education* (1st edn, pp. 17–37). Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003538974>
- Ang, S., & Dyne, L. V. (2008). Conceptualization of Cultural Intelligence: Definition, Distinctiveness, and Nomological Network. In *Handbook of Cultural Intelligence* (pp. 21–33). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315703855-9>
- Ang, S., Van Dyne, L., Koh, C., Ng, K. Y., Templer, K. J., Tay, C., & Chandrasekar, N. A. (2007). Cultural Intelligence: Its Measurement and Effects on Cultural Judgment and Decision Making, Cultural Adaptation and Task Performance. *Management and Organization Review*, 3(3), 335–371. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-8784.2007.00082.x>

- Barrett, M., & Borghetti, C. (2025). What Is Intercultural Competence? In P. Genkova, M. Flynn, M. Morley, & M. Rašticová (Eds), *Handbook of Diversity Competence: European Perspectives* (pp. 93–108). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69308-3_7
- Belz, J. A. (2003). Linguistic perspectives on the development of intercultural competence in telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology*, 7(2), 68–117. <https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/25201>
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Cooper, H., Camic, P. M., Panter, A. T., Long, D. L., Rindskopf, D., & Sher, K. J. (2012). Thematic analysis. In *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Breaden, J., Do, T. T. Q., Anjos-Santos, L. M., & Normand-Marconnet, N. (2025). Does internationalisation at a distance democratise student mobility? Critical insights from the Asia-Pacific region. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 56(2), 852–869. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13541>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800410251>
- Byram, M. (2020). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence: Revisited* (Second edition.). Channel View Publications. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800410251>
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266.
- DeJonckheere, M., & Vaughn, L. M. (2019). Semistructured interviewing in primary care research: A balance of relationship and rigour. *Family Medicine and Community Health*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2018-000057>
- Dooly, M., & Vinagre, M. (2022). Research into practice: Virtual exchange in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 55(3), 392–406. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444821000069>
- Earley, P. Christopher., & Ang, Soon. (2003). Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures. In *Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures*. Stanford University Press.
- Goh, M., Akiba, H., Yonezawa, Y., Hirai, T., & Horie, M. (2024). Developing intercultural competence through internationalizing higher education: Case studies of three Japanese universities. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 13(1), 62–90. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2025.2469950>
- Grimes-MacLellan 1, D. (2017). Challenges for study abroad in contemporary Japan Inward-looking youth or cost-conscious consumers? *Study Abroad Research in Second Language Acquisition and International Education*, 2(2), 147–174. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1075/sar.16019.gri>

- Hagley, E. (2020). Effects of virtual exchange in the EFL classroom on students' cultural and intercultural sensitivity. *Computer-Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal*, 2(3), 74–87. <http://callej.org/journal/21-3/Hagley2020.pdf>
- Hagley, E., & Yunita, W. (2025). Examining Indonesian Students' Intercultural Presence in, and perspectives of, an International Community of Inquiry Via Virtual Exchange. *Computer-Assisted Language Learning Electronic Journal*, 26(1), 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.54855/callej.252613>
- Helm, F. (2024). Intercultural communication in virtual exchange. In *Intercultural communication in virtual exchange* (First edition). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009385589>
- Helm, F., Thorne, S. L., & May, S. (2017). Critical Approaches to Online Intercultural Language Education. In *Language, Education and Technology* (pp. 219–231). Springer International Publishing.
- Horie, M. (2002). The Internationalization of Higher Education in Japan in the 1990s: A Reconsideration. *Higher Education*, 43(1), 65–84. JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3447475>
- Horie, M. (2025). 多文化間共修は難しい?: 学習者の視点から考える 意義と学びを深める仕掛けづくり ([特集] 多文化 間共修を促す教養教育のあり方). *Kobe University Repository*. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/0100495447>
- Kajitani, S. (2018). *What is thinking? Introduction to philosophy for people aged from 0–100 (Kangaeru to wa douiu kotoka: 0 sai kara 100 madeno tetsugaku nyumon)*. Gentosha Shinsho.
- Leung, K., Soon, A., & Mei Ling, T. (2014). Intercultural Competence. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1, 489–519. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091229>
- Lewis, T., & O'Dowd, R. (2016). Online Intercultural Exchange and Foreign Language Learning: A Systematic Review. In *Online Intercultural Exchange* (1st edn, pp. 21–66). Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315678931-3>
- Maeda, K. (2004). A study of differences in small-class teaching— Nonparametric tests. In *Introduction to educational data analysis for English teachers* (pp. 53–62). Daishukan Publishing.
- Malcom, W. (2019). Defining and Assessing Global Competence: Recommendations from a Qualitative Instrumental Single Case Study at a Japanese University. *Fukui University of Technology*, 49, 242–256.
- Matsumoto, D., & Hwang, H. C. (2013). Assessing Cross-Cultural Competence: A Review of Available Tests. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44(6), 849–873. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022113492891>
- Ministry of Education, Cultures, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). (2025, April 30). 「日本人学生の海外留学状況」及び「外国人留学生の在籍状況」.

- Mittelmeier, J., Rienties, B., Gunter, A., & Raghuram, P. (2021). Conceptualizing Internationalization at a Distance: A “Third Category” of University Internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 25(3), 266–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153231222278>
- Munezane, Y. (2021). A new model of intercultural communicative competence: Bridging language classrooms and intercultural communicative contexts. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 46(8), 1664–1681. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1698537>
- O’Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: State-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1>
- O’Dowd, R. (2021). Virtual exchange: Moving forward into the next decade. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(3), 209–224. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1902201>
- O’Dowd, R. (2023). Internationalising higher education and the role of virtual exchange. In *Internationalising higher education and the role of virtual exchange*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=7141651>
- O’Dowd, R. (2025). Issues of equity and inclusion in Virtual Exchange. *Language Teaching*, 58(1), 44–56. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144482300040X>
- Sabzalieva, E., Masri, A. E., Joshi, A., Laufer, M., Trilokekar, R. D., & Haas, C. (2022). Ideal immigrants in name only? Shifting constructions and divergent discourses on the international student-immigration policy nexus in Australia, Canada, and Germany. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 6(2), 178–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2022.2096106>
- Sakamoto, F. (2022). Global competence in Japan: What do students really need? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 91, 216–228. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.10.006>
- Soga, H. (2020). An Empirical Study on the Relationship among the Factors of Cultural Intelligence. *Journal of Japan Management Diagnosis Association*, 20, 38–43.
- Wang, K. T., & Goh, M. (2020). The Wiley Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences: Clinical, Applied, and Cross-Cultural Research Cultural Intelligence. In *The Wiley Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences: Clinical, Applied, and Cross-Cultural Research* (pp. 269–273). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118970843.ch310>
- Wang, Y., & Kulich, S. J. (2015). Does context count? Developing and assessing intercultural competence through an interview- and model-based domestic course design in China. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 48, 38–57. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.03.013>
- Watanabe, M. (2020a). Project Ibunka – a web-based virtual exchange project. In *Virtual exchange in the Asia-Pacific: Research and practice* (pp. 201–

- 230). Research-publishing.net|. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.47.1153>
- Watanabe, M. (2020b). Tackling international controversies in virtual exchange. In *Virtual exchange in the Asia-Pacific: Research and practice* (pp. 61–76). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.47.1146>
- Watanabe, M. (2024). A Cross-Cultural Language Course with Different Degrees of Media-Virtuality. *The Journal of Tokiwanomori*, 11, 40–52.
- Watanabe, M. (2025). Japanese University EFL Learners' Needs for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC): A Cross-National Comparison. *Intercultural Communication & Global Issues in Language Education 2024 Conference Peer-Reviewed Proceedings*, 66–89.
- White, C., Zheng, Y., & Skyrme, G. (2021). Developing a model for investigating one-to-one synchronous Chinese online language teaching via videoconferencing. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(1–2), 92–113. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2020.1770800>
- Wimpenny, K., Finardi, K. R., Orsini-Jones, M., & Jacobs, L. (2022). Knowing, Being, Relating and Expressing Through Third Space Global South-North COIL: Digital Inclusion and Equity in International Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(2), 279–296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153221094085>
- Yamada, M. (2012). A Study about Effective Methods of Communication Skills Training A General View about Self-evaluation by Japanese Female College Students for Their Communication Skills. *Saitama Women's Junior College Bulletin*, 26, 135–152.

Author bio

Yoko Matsumoto is a PhD student at the School of Languages, Literature, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University, Australia. Her research interests lie at the intersection of virtual exchange, intercultural communicative competence, foreign language education, and the internationalization of higher education. Email: Yoko.Matsumoto@monash.edu
