

What are Junior College Students Learning from Interacting with International Students?

「短期大学生は留学生との交流を通じて何を学んでいるのか」

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Abstract

This study offers a preliminary examination of what students at Kanazawa Seiryō University Women's Junior College (hereafter "Seitan") may be learning through interactions with international students studying Japanese at the university. Focusing on seminar students who expressed interest in cultural exchange, the research investigates their experiences participating in student-led events conducted primarily in Japanese, with occasional use of English. Student reflections collected through reports and presentations suggest that even brief, informal interactions can foster intercultural awareness, personal growth, and communicative adaptability. While the study is limited in scale, the findings highlight the value of localized exchange opportunities in developing intercultural competence among students who may not study abroad. These insights contribute to broader conversations about global education and domestic internationalization efforts in Japanese higher education.

本研究は、金沢星稜大学女子短期大学（以下「星短」）の学生が、同大学で日本語を学ぶ留学生との交流を通じてどのような学びを得ているのかを予備的に検討したものである。文化交流に関心を示したゼミ生を対象に、主に日本語（一部英語）を用いた学生主体の交流イベントに参加した経験を考察した。学生のレポートおよび発表を通じて得られた振り返りからは、短期間かつ非公式な交流であっても、異文化への気づき、自己成長、柔軟なコミュニケーション能力の育成に寄与していることが示唆された。調査規模は小さいものの、本研究は、海外留学の機会が限られている学生にとって、国内における交流の場が異文化理解力の向上に有効であることを明らかにしており、日本の高等教育におけるグローバル教育および国内国際化の取り組みに資する知見を提供するものと捉えられる。

1. Introduction

In recent years, Japan has seen a steady increase in both foreign tourism and international student enrolment (JTB Tourism, 2025; MEXT, 2025). As a result, the need to cultivate cultural awareness and intercultural competence among domestic students has become increasingly important. When individuals encounter different cultural environments, they often rely on familiar cultural schemas; existing knowledge frameworks used to interpret new experiences. However, as Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman (2004:199) note, “we need to rebuild our schemas when in different cultures and not feel that we can ‘get by’ with our previous ones.” This observation applies not only to visitors in Japan but also to Japanese students engaging with international peers. Through such interactions, students are offered opportunities to expand their cultural frameworks and deepen their understanding of both other cultures and their own.

Intercultural exchange, here defined as interaction with individuals outside one’s usual cultural or social circles, plays a vital role in fostering this development. For Japanese students who may not have the opportunity to study abroad due to financial constraints or personal circumstances, domestic intercultural experiences can serve as valuable alternatives. These encounters encourage self-reflection, cultural curiosity, and the development of adaptive communication skills. As Shaules (2019) points out, while exposure to different cultures can be challenging, it often promotes personal growth and a deeper understanding of oneself and others. For international students, such interactions also offer meaningful engagement with the host culture and opportunities to build friendships.

This paper explores what Seitan students may be learning through interactions with international students at Kanazawa Seiryō University. Specifically, it focuses on students from a seminar class at Seitan who participated in a series of student-led exchange events. Drawing on student reflections and established frameworks for intercultural competence, the study examines how localized experiences can support the development of global competencies.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the background of intercultural initiatives in Japanese higher education. Section 3 presents the theoretical foundations for intercultural competence. Section 4 describes the data collection method. Section 5 reveals the findings, while Section 6 discusses the implications of the results, addressing limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Background

As Japan continues to internationalize its education sector, there has been a growing emphasis on developing “global human resources”. This push toward internationalization is reflected in both national education policy and institutional practices aimed at preparing students to engage meaningfully in an increasingly interconnected world.

One key initiative in this effort is the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)’s Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development:

“The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development is a funding project that aims to overcome the Japanese younger generation’s ‘inward tendency’ and to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field...” (MEXT, 2012)

According to MEXT, global human resources are expected to possess the following key attributes:

1. Language and communication skills
2. Initiative, proactivity, flexibility, and responsibility
3. Understanding of other cultures and a clear sense of Japanese identity

While Seitan students may not major in English or aim for study abroad, domestic programs can still provide valuable intercultural experiences that help nurture these competencies. Interacting with international students, even primarily in Japanese, offers students opportunities to confront cultural differences, reflect on their own values, and develop adaptive communication strategies, all of which are key components of intercultural competence.

As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013:24) explain, “people who share the same general set of cultural practices share an understanding of the meanings that are associated with language as it is used for communication.” For students accustomed to communicating only within familiar cultural settings, interacting with international peers introduces the challenge of expressing ideas more intentionally, clearly, and thoughtfully, whether in Japanese, English, or through non-verbal means.

Such interactions also naturally expose students to moments of misunderstanding or miscommunication, which are not setbacks, but essential opportunities for intercultural learning. Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009:5) note that “often people underestimate the amount of

background information that is required to be shared upfront to create a platform for mutual understanding.” These situations call on students to clarify meaning, express empathy, and build the flexibility essential to intercultural competence and global citizenship.

Face-to-face interaction further allows students to challenge preconceived notions about others and themselves. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013:29) observe: “An intercultural perspective implies the transformational engagement of the learner in the act of learning. The goal of learning is to decenter learners from their preexisting assumptions and practices and to develop an intercultural identity through engagement with an additional culture.” Through such engagement, students can move beyond stereotypes and begin to see others as complex individuals.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how Seitan students perceive and articulate their learning through participation in campus-based exchange events with international students. These activities, though small in scale, represent a local response to broader national and institutional goals aimed at fostering graduates with global competencies.

3. Theoretical Framework

To explore what Seitan students may be gaining from their intercultural interactions, it is essential to position this study within the broader field of intercultural competence. This section outlines the key theoretical models and frameworks that underpin the analysis of students’ experiences and reflections throughout the study.

3.1. Intercultural Competence as a Developmental Process

Intercultural competence is broadly defined by Deardorff (2008) as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. One of the most widely accepted models is Deardorff’s (2006) *Developmental Model of Intercultural Competence*, which conceptualizes intercultural growth as a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome. Deardorff (2006) identifies the following key components:

- 1 Attitudes: Openness, curiosity, and respect for other cultures
2. Knowledge: Cultural awareness and self-understanding
3. Skills: Observation, analysis, interpretation, and interaction
4. Internal Outcomes: Adapted perspectives and new ways of thinking
5. External Outcomes: Demonstrated intercultural behavior and communication

This model is particularly useful for analyzing informal, short-term exchange experiences, such as those described in this study, where students are unlikely to become fluent in other languages or cultures but may still undergo attitudinal and behavioral changes.

3.2. Intercultural Competence in Practice

Building on Deardorff's framework, Reid and Spencer-Oatey (2013) offer a more detailed model of the skills needed for successful intercultural interaction. Their *Intercultural Competence Framework* identifies practical competencies that can be fostered through interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. These include:

- Attentive listening
- Rapport building
- Flexible thinking and behavior
- Initiative and responsibility
- Cultural and contextual awareness

These competencies offer a practical framework for analyzing students' reflections on their behaviors and attitudes during intercultural interactions. For instance, students who begin to anticipate communication challenges, ask more thoughtful questions, or reflect on their own assumptions are demonstrating early development in these areas.

While these frameworks were developed primarily in Western higher education contexts, their core principles are applicable in Japan, especially as Japanese institutions become more internationalized. In the case of Seitan students who may have limited foreign language proficiency or opportunities to study abroad, local engagement with international students can offer meaningful opportunities for developing intercultural skills.

3.3. Intercultural Learning in the Japanese Context

In Japan, the concept of global human resources has been emphasized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), which advocates for students to develop not only language abilities but also initiative, flexibility, and a clear understanding of their own cultural identity. These goals align closely with the outcomes identified in the intercultural competence models discussed above.

Additionally, scholars such as Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) highlight the importance of reflection in the process of intercultural learning. They argue that learners must engage critically

with their own assumptions, experiences, and communicative practices to develop intercultural understanding. This reflective component is especially relevant in this study, where students were asked to articulate what they had learned through written reports and presentations.

3.4. Relevance to the Present Study

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks suggest that even limited and localized intercultural experiences can foster meaningful development when they involve:

- Exposure to cultural differences
- Active participation and self-initiated effort
- Reflection on one's own assumptions and behaviors

The student-led exchange events at Seitan provided precisely such opportunities. By planning and participating in intercultural interactions, students engaged in the kinds of processes described by Deardorff, Reid and Spencer-Oatey; developing awareness, experimenting with new behaviors, and reflecting on their experiences. These models therefore provide an essential foundation for analyzing what the students learned, not only in terms of communication skills but also in their evolving attitudes, self-perceptions, and worldviews.

4. Data source and method

In 2024, eleven students participated in my seminar class that met weekly. Although most students perceived their English proficiency to be low, they were eager to interact with international students, primarily using Japanese. Their goal was to foster connections through casual activities, such as games on campus, hoping these interactions might lead to off-campus tours and deeper friendships.

The students carefully planned each event, selecting games, arranging the schedule, preparing questions, and even offering Japanese snacks to encourage participation. The first round of events in December 2023 saw moderate success, with small groups of international students from Russia, China, and Taiwan attending over three sessions.

However, after a new cohort of international students arrived, attendance dropped significantly. Despite careful scheduling, participation from international students remained low. The seminar students were disappointed, particularly in comparison to the 2023 turnout, but remained committed to making the most of each opportunity.

Students were asked to write reflective reports detailing their experiences and learnings from each exchange event. These reflections were used to prepare for their final seminar presentations. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) emphasize, reflection is essential in intercultural teaching and learning, as it fosters awareness of how individuals think, understand, and engage with language, culture, and identity. For their final presentation about their interactions with international students, they described their actions, insights, and shifts in perspective.

5. Findings

The student reflections reveal several recurring themes that align closely with the theoretical components of intercultural competence. Although the exchange events were limited in scale, the depth of insight expressed in the students' final presentations suggests that meaningful learning did occur.

5.1. Proactiveness and Taking Initiative

Many students highlighted the importance of being proactive during exchanges with international students. As the following statements suggest, they learned that successful communication and smooth event execution require active participation and initiative.

- *“I learned that we need to be prepared to deal with different situations.”*
- *“Things will not go smoothly unless we are proactive.”*
- *“It is important not to leave everything to others, but to act on your own initiative.”*
- *“If you just wait for someone else to do something, nothing will happen.”*

5.2. Flexibility and Adaptability

As suggested by the statements as follows, students also recognized the need to be flexible when unexpected situations arose, such as last-minute changes or language barriers. This helped them handle challenges effectively during exchanges.

- *“We were able to look at the situation and respond flexibly.”*
- *“I learned the importance of being flexible and how to communicate effectively.”*
- *“Using simple words and gestures is important because difficult words may be misunderstood.”*
- *“We began to think about “what might be”, such as language barriers.”*

5.3. Communication Skills Beyond Language

A key learning was that communication goes beyond language fluency. Students understood that listening carefully, using gestures, making eye contact, and maintaining a positive attitude are critical components.

- *“Communication can be expanded just by changing the way you listen with the attitude of trying to get to know the other person.”*
- *“I learned that speaking is not the only way to communicate. Listening to understand the other person is a factor in connecting a conversation.”*
- *“I learned that communication is possible even if you speak a different language if you have an attitude of trying to communicate.”*
- *“Reacting and making eye contact makes others feel at ease.”*
- *“I felt that what is necessary in communication is the desire to communicate to the other person and the desire to understand the other person.”*

5.4. Positivity and Openness

Students admired the positive attitudes of the international students and learned to adopt a similar mindset, overcoming initial resistance or hesitation to engage.

- *“The positive attitude of the international students surprised me; I learned I still have a long way to go.”*
- *“What I learned was not to be resistant from the beginning, especially when communicating in English.”*
- *“Positivity is important and talking to people and asking questions yourself can deepen exchanges.”*

5.5. Curiosity and Cultural Interest

Interacting with international students sparked curiosity about other cultures, leading some students to reflect on cultural differences and common interests such as animation and history.

- *“I became interested in the differences in culture and customs between countries.”*
- *“By speaking up, I discovered cultures and personalities I did not know.”*
- *“They are all interested in Japanese animation, culture and history.”*

5.6. Mutual Respect and Equality

Some students emphasized the importance of treating international students as equals rather

than as language learners needing correction, fostering genuine mutual learning.

- *“Have an attitude of not being a teacher of Japanese, but of treating each other as equals and learning from each other.”*
- *“Listening carefully and responding with interest can build a relationship.”*

5.7. Application Beyond the Seminar

Finally, students acknowledged that the skills they developed; proactiveness, communication, flexibility, and openness, are transferable to broader societal contexts beyond international exchange.

- *“What I learned and gained from the seminar can be used not only at school but also in many other situations in society.”*
- *“I would like to improve my ability to act positively and communicate with others when I go out into the world.”*
- *“These experiences made me realize that action and positivity are important.”*

Taken together, these reflections illustrate that even within a limited timeframe and a small-scale setting, students experienced meaningful shifts in mindset, behavior, and self-awareness. The recurring themes, such as increased initiative, flexible communication, openness to cultural difference, and the value of mutual respect, suggest that students engaged in a process of intercultural development aligned with established models of intercultural competence. These findings set the stage for a deeper analysis of how localized exchange activities can contribute to broader educational goals, as discussed in the following section.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The student reflections collected through the seminar reveal that meaningful intercultural learning can occur even in small-scale, localized settings. When examined through the lens of the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, several key areas of development emerge:

- **Initiative and Responsibility:** Students demonstrated a growing willingness to take action and assume responsibility for successful communication and event planning. This aligns closely with both MEXT’s (2012) objectives and intercultural competence models such as Reid and Spencer-Oatey’s (2013).
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Many students reported learning how to respond effectively to

unexpected situations, such as low participation or language barriers, by adjusting their communication strategies. These responses reflect the development of behavioural flexibility emphasized by Reid and Spencer-Oatey (2013).

- **Listening and Relationship Building:** Students came to recognize the importance of active listening, empathy, and non-verbal communication in establishing rapport, particularly when linguistic proficiency was limited. These also reflect Reid and Spencer-Oatey's (2013) competency regarding attentive listening.
- **Cultural Awareness and Curiosity:** Interactions with international students sparked an interest in other cultures, as well as reflection on students' own cultural identities. This mirrors the process of critical reflection highlighted by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013).
- **Positive Attitudes Toward Difference:** Initial feelings of anxiety or hesitation were often replaced by greater openness and willingness to engage. Several students specifically cited the international students' positive attitudes as a source of motivation and inspiration. This shift in perspective aligns with Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence, specifically 'Internal Outcomes'.

These points affirm that intercultural competence is not solely the result of long-term immersion or international study, but can also emerge through localized, reflective experiences. Deardorff (2008) explains that people build intercultural competence slowly over time, depending on the situation, rather than all at once through a single experience.

Moreover, the outcomes observed align with Japan's national education goals related to the cultivation of global human resources. Although these Seitan students did not study abroad, their experiences contributed meaningfully to their growth in areas such as communication, empathy, and adaptability; skills that are both interculturally and professionally valuable.

While the depth of learning varied, the consistency across student reflections suggests that the seminar provided a structured environment in which intercultural skills could be developed and internalized. This supports the growing body of research suggesting that thoughtfully designed domestic exchange programs, when paired with structured reflection, can play a critical role in preparing students for global citizenship.

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the development of intercultural competence in a localized junior college context, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, it should be mentioned that the sample size was small and limited to a single seminar

class of 11 students at one institution. This naturally restricts the generalizability of the results to other settings or larger populations. Future research could expand the scope by including multiple classes, different institutions, or a broader range of student demographics to verify whether similar patterns emerge.

Second, the study relied exclusively on student self-reflections as data. Although reflective writing provides valuable qualitative insights, it may be influenced by students' tendency to present themselves in a favorable light or by limitations in their ability to fully articulate their experiences. Interviews, observations, and international student feedback could enhance triangulation and provide richer insights.

Third, the intercultural exchange activities were relatively short and informal in nature. More extended and structured programs could facilitate deeper intercultural learning and enable the monitoring of developmental progress over time. Longitudinal research would be valuable to gain insights into how intercultural competence develops beyond initial encounters.

Fourth, this study focused primarily on cognitive and attitudinal aspects of intercultural competence. Further exploration of behavioral outcomes, such as sustained intercultural friendships or changes in communication patterns, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of its impact.

Finally, future research might also investigate how technology, such as translation apps or virtual exchanges, can, if at all, enhance or supplement face-to-face interactions, especially in contexts where language proficiency is limited.

To conclude, this study explored how Seitan students developed intercultural competence through localized exchange activities with international peers. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks and national education goals, the research demonstrated that even in contexts marked by limited English proficiency and small-scale events, students made significant progress in key areas such as initiative, flexibility, cultural curiosity, and communication.

The reflective writings of the seminar students indicated a progression from initial hesitation to proactive participation, from inflexible self-expectations to more adaptable behaviors, and from language-related anxiety to an appreciation of effort and the use of diverse communication strategies. These developments highlight the value of providing authentic interaction opportunities, reinforced by structured reflection and supportive guidance.

Ultimately, this research supports the view that intercultural competence is a multifaceted, developmental process that can be fostered in diverse environments, not only through study abroad but also through intentional local initiatives. By encouraging students to reflect critically on their experiences and emotions, educators can facilitate deeper understanding and prepare learners to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

As Japan continues to prioritize global human resource development, programs like the one described here offer practical, accessible models for cultivating the attitudes and skills necessary for successful intercultural engagement. With further refinement and expansion, such initiatives have the potential to contribute significantly to global education within Japan and beyond.

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