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FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE THROUGH INDONESIAN–JAPANESE EXCHANGE

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Abstract: As higher education institutions intensify internationalization efforts, developing students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a strategic educational priority. This study aimed to explore the intercultural communication experiences of students participating in a two-day Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program organized by Universitas Darma Persada and Kanto Gakuin University. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected from 14 undergraduate students through open-ended questionnaires and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Four major themes emerged: (1) positive intercultural learning experiences, (2) increased cultural awareness and understanding, (3) enhanced awareness of the relationship between language and culture, and (4) recommendations for future exchange programs. The findings indicate that authentic face-to-face interaction fostered openness, communication confidence, intercultural awareness, and critical reflection while enabling students to challenge cultural stereotypes through meaningful engagement. Unlike previous studies that have predominantly focused on virtual exchanges or long-term study-abroad programs, this study demonstrates that even a short-term face-to-face exchange can significantly contribute to the development of ICC. These findings offer practical insights for higher education institutions seeking accessible, sustainable, and experience-based internationalization strategies through short-term intercultural exchange programs.
Keywords: *Intercultural communicative competence; cross-cultural exchange; face-to-face interaction; qualitative research; higher education.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid internationalization of higher education has fundamentally reshaped university missions worldwide, moving beyond the mere transmission of disciplinary knowledge to cultivating graduates capable of communicating and collaborating effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Leask, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Within this globalized landscape, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) the capacity to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse backgrounds, has emerged as a core educational priority. Theoretically, this developmental process is grounded in Byram's (2021) ICC framework, which posits that successful intercultural interaction requires a dynamic interplay of attitudes (savoir être), cultural knowledge (savoirs), interpreting skills (savoir comprendre), discovery skills (savoir apprendre/faire), and critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager). Furthermore, Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory clarifies that such competencies are not passively acquired but actively constructed through a recursive cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

While scholarship on ICC in higher education has expanded significantly, existing literature exhibits three critical limitations. First, driven by cost constraints and technological advancement, recent research has heavily emphasized Virtual Exchange (VE) and telecollaboration (e.g., Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Gutiérrez-Santiuste & Ritacco-Real, 2023). However, scholars note that virtual environments often fail to fully replicate the spontaneous non-verbal cues, emotional resonance, and immediate social presence intrinsic to face-to-face encounters (Helm,

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2020; O'Dowd, 2021). Second, empirical evaluations of ICC remain dominated by quantitative self-report scales (e.g., Hackett et al., 2023), which frequently mask the subjective, nuanced, and dynamic sense-making processes through which students personally interpret cultural encounters (Deardorff, 2020; Fantini, 2020). Third, despite growing institutional ties in the Asia-Pacific region, empirical studies focusing specifically on short-term Indonesian–Japanese higher education partnerships remain scarce (Yashima, 2022), leaving a knowledge gap regarding how EFL students from contrasting Asian cultural contexts negotiate communicative norms in direct interactions.

Intercultural communication provides opportunities for students to encounter perspectives that may differ from their own and to reconsider assumptions about language, culture, and social interaction. Spitzberg and Changnon (2022) discuss intercultural competence in relation to the complex factors that shape communication across cultural contexts, while Deardorff (2020) emphasizes the importance of intercultural understanding in educational and global engagement. Within higher education, exchange programs can create opportunities for students to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds through dialogue, collaborative activities, and shared experiences. Such encounters may allow students to observe cultural practices directly, negotiate meanings, and reflect on how cultural values influence communication.

Participation in an exchange program should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of measurable improvement in intercultural competence. Students' accounts of their experiences are also important for understanding what they notice, how they interpret intercultural encounters, and which aspects of learning they consider meaningful.

Previous discussions of intercultural learning have highlighted the value of authentic interaction and experiential learning. Leask (2021) emphasizes the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into higher education, while research on intercultural learning has also examined the role of collaborative and international educational experiences in developing students' awareness of cultural differences. Paige et al. (2022) and Hackett et al. (2023), as cited in this study's literature base, provide relevant points of comparison for considering how intercultural experiences relate to cultural understanding and communication. Nevertheless, the educational value of an exchange cannot be understood solely through its format or duration. It is also necessary to examine how participants experience the activities, interpret interactions with peers, and reflect on the relationship between language and culture. In particular, qualitative accounts can complement measures of intercultural competence by providing contextual detail about participants' perceptions and the meanings they attach to specific encounters.

Despite the relevance of intercultural exchange to language and cultural education, further context-specific investigation is needed into students' experiences of short-term, face-to-face exchange programs involving Indonesian and Japanese universities. In the context of the present study, the focus is not to establish that face-to-face exchange is inherently more effective than virtual exchange or long-term international mobility. Rather, it is to examine how participants describe intercultural learning within a specific Indonesian–Japanese partnership. This focus is important because general findings about international education do not necessarily explain how students from these two institutional and cultural contexts experience particular activities, communicate across cultural differences, or understand the connection between language use and cultural meaning. Furthermore, while quantitative instruments can provide structured measures of selected dimensions of intercultural competence, open-ended

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responses offer a complementary means of exploring participants' own reflections and the experiences they regard as significant.

To address this focus, the present study examines a two-day Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program jointly organized by the English Language and Culture Study Program at Universitas Darma Persada, Indonesia, and Kanto Gakuin University, Japan. The program included cultural presentations, collaborative discussions, question-and-answer sessions, traditional games, campus interaction, and informal conversations, with English serving as the primary medium of communication. These activities provided a context in which students from the two universities could exchange cultural perspectives and reflect on their intercultural encounters.

The study draws on Byram's (2021) Intercultural Communicative Competence framework to consider participants' reflections on cultural attitudes, knowledge, interpretation, and interaction. Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory also provides a complementary perspective for understanding how participants make sense of experiences through reflection. Together, these perspectives inform the interpretation of students' accounts without assuming that a short-term program necessarily produces lasting or objectively measurable changes in competence.

This study addresses these empirical and context-specific gaps by examining a short-term, face-to-face cross-cultural exchange between Universitas Darma Persada (Indonesia) and Kanto Gakuin University (Japan). Beyond merely describing a face-to-face setting, the novelty of this research lies in demonstrating how a low-cost, short-duration (two-day) experiential exchange can serve as a potent catalyst for triggering Byram's core ICC dimensions and Kolb's reflective cycles within an Asian higher education framework. By focusing on direct human engagement, this study provides empirical evidence on an accessible and sustainable alternative to traditional, costly semester-long study-abroad programs. Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived intercultural communication experiences of undergraduate students participating in the Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program. Specifically, it seeks to examine how students interpret their face-to-face interactions, identify the specific forms of intercultural learning that emerge, and investigate how these short-term encounters contribute to their overall intercultural communicative competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Communication in Higher Education. The increasing internationalization of higher education has positioned intercultural communication as one of the essential competencies that university graduates should develop. As universities expand international partnerships and student exchange initiatives, students are expected not only to demonstrate linguistic proficiency but also to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication is generally defined as the process through which individuals from different cultures exchange messages, negotiate meanings, and establish mutual understanding despite differences in language, values, beliefs, and communication practices (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2022). In educational settings, intercultural communication enables students to develop empathy, openness, adaptability, and respect for cultural diversity, all of which are fundamental attributes of global citizenship (Deardorff, 2020).

Recent studies suggest that authentic intercultural interaction contributes significantly to students' academic, personal, and professional development. Through direct communication with peers from different cultures, students become more aware of cultural differences, improve their communication confidence, and develop greater intercultural sensitivity. These

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experiences extend beyond language learning by encouraging learners to critically examine their own cultural assumptions while appreciating alternative perspectives (Leask, 2021).

Intercultural Communicative Competence

This study is primarily informed by Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework. According to Byram (2021), successful intercultural communication requires more than grammatical competence or linguistic accuracy. Instead, individuals should develop five interrelated dimensions: attitudes of curiosity and openness toward other cultures (savoir être), knowledge of one's own and others' cultural practices (savoirs), skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre), skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire), and critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager).

The ICC framework has become one of the most influential theoretical models in intercultural education because it emphasizes the integration of knowledge, attitudes, and communicative skills. Rather than viewing culture as static information, Byram conceptualizes intercultural competence as a dynamic process through which learners continuously negotiate meanings during intercultural encounters. Consequently, authentic interaction plays a central role in developing intercultural communicative competence.

Within the context of this study, Byram's framework provides an analytical lens for understanding how students experienced intercultural communication during the Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program. Students' reflections are expected to demonstrate aspects of intercultural attitudes, cultural knowledge, interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness developed through direct engagement with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

Experiential Learning Theory

The second theoretical foundation of this study is Experiential Learning Theory proposed by Kolb (2015). Kolb argues that meaningful learning occurs through a cyclical process consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Learning therefore emerges from individuals' reflections on authentic experiences rather than from passive reception of information.

Face-to-face cross-cultural exchange programs provide ideal learning environments for experiential learning because participants actively engage in intercultural conversations, collaborative activities, cultural presentations, and informal social interactions. Through these experiences, students encounter unfamiliar cultural perspectives that encourage reflection and the reconstruction of previous assumptions. As learners interpret these experiences, they gradually develop new intercultural knowledge and communication strategies that can be applied in future intercultural situations.

Experiential learning has been widely applied in international education because it explains how authentic intercultural encounters facilitate transformative learning. Rather than learning about another culture through textbooks alone, students learn by interacting directly with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, making intercultural competence an outcome of lived experience.

Previous Studies

Research on intercultural communication in higher education has expanded considerably during the last decade. Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) conducted a systematic review and concluded that international collaborative learning enhances intercultural competence, global citizenship, and collaborative engagement among university students. Likewise, Hackett et al. (2023) reported that sustained intercultural interaction improves communication confidence, intercultural sensitivity, and collaborative skills.

Gutiérrez-Santiuste and Ritacco-Real

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(2023) further demonstrated that intercultural learning environments encourage students to negotiate meanings, reflect on cultural differences, and develop more positive attitudes toward cultural diversity. Similarly, Paige et al. (2022) emphasized that authentic intercultural experiences promote reflective learning, empathy, and cultural understanding more effectively than classroom-based instruction.

Despite these contributions, previous studies have predominantly examined virtual exchange, online international collaboration, or study-abroad programs. Comparatively limited research has explored students' intercultural communication experiences within short-term face-to-face cross-cultural exchange programs involving Indonesian and Japanese universities. Moreover, many previous investigations have relied on quantitative measures of intercultural competence, providing relatively limited insight into students' lived experiences and personal reflections. This gap highlights the need for qualitative investigations that capture students' own voices and interpretations of intercultural interaction within authentic educational settings.

METHOD

Respondents

The participants were 14 undergraduate students who took part in the two-day Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program jointly organized by the English Language and Culture Study Program at Universitas Darma Persada, Indonesia, and Kanto Gakuin University, Japan. The participants consisted of nine students from Universitas Darma Persada and five students from Kanto Gakuin University. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who had completed all activities in the exchange program and were therefore able to provide reflections on their intercultural communication experiences. Participation in the study was voluntary. All 14 participants completed the exchange program and provided written responses to the open-ended questionnaire. Their responses formed the dataset for the qualitative analysis.

Instruments

The primary research instrument was an online questionnaire consisting of demographic questions and open-ended prompts. The questionnaire was developed specifically for this study to explore participants' experiences and reflections on the Indonesian–Japanese exchange program. Its development was informed by Byram's (2021) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework, particularly the dimensions of intercultural attitudes, cultural knowledge, and skills of interaction. The prompts were designed to elicit descriptive accounts rather than responses restricted to predetermined answer choices.

The open-ended questions addressed seven areas: participants' overall impressions of the program; new knowledge or insights about Indonesian and Japanese cultures; experiences and feelings when communicating with peers from different cultural backgrounds; perceptions of cultural presentations and collaborative activities; memorable or impactful moments; challenges encountered during intercultural communication and how participants responded to them; and suggestions for improving future exchange programs.

Before administration, the questionnaire was reviewed by two senior lecturers with expertise in English language education and intercultural communication. The review focused on the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the questions for investigating students' intercultural communication experiences. The questionnaire was then used to collect participants' written reflections through Google Forms. The instrument was designed for the present study rather than reported as an adaptation of a standardized intercultural competence scale. Byram's framework informed the development of the prompts and the subsequent interpretation of the responses.

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Procedures

The study was conducted in the context of a two-day Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program organized jointly by Universitas Darma Persada and Kanto Gakuin University. The program included cultural presentations, collaborative discussions, question-and-answer sessions, traditional games, campus interaction, and informal conversations. English served as the primary medium of communication during the activities, providing participants with opportunities to interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

After the completion of the exchange program, the participants were invited to complete an online open-ended questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. The questionnaire was administered immediately after the final session so that participants could reflect on their experiences while the activities and interactions were still recent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, the intended academic use of the data, confidentiality arrangements, and their right to decline participation or discontinue their involvement without negative consequences. Submission of the completed questionnaire was treated as informed consent.

The questionnaire was completed individually, without researcher intervention, to allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives in their own words. No personally identifying information, such as names or student identification numbers, was collected. The responses were anonymized before analysis and stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. The data were used for academic research purposes, and the findings were reported using selected anonymized quotations to illustrate participants' accounts.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach was selected because it supports the interpretation of patterns of meaning across qualitative data while allowing researchers to examine how participants describe and make sense of their experiences. The analysis focused on participants' written accounts of intercultural interaction, cultural awareness, the relationship between language and culture, and their suggestions for future exchange activities.

The analysis began with familiarization with the dataset. The researchers read the responses repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of participants' accounts and to identify statements relevant to the research objectives. Attention was given to descriptions of meaningful interactions, newly recognized cultural differences or similarities, communication experiences, and challenges encountered during the program.

Next, meaningful segments of the responses were identified and coded according to the aspects of experience they expressed. The initial codes captured recurring ideas in the participants' accounts, including positive experiences of intercultural interaction, insights into cultural practices, perceptions of language as culturally situated, and recommendations for improving exchange activities. The codes were then compared across the dataset to identify relationships and broader patterns of meaning. Related codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the original responses to assess whether they represented coherent patterns relevant to the research questions.

The researchers subsequently refined and named the themes to reflect their central meanings. The resulting thematic structure comprised four themes: (1) positive intercultural learning experiences; (2) increased cultural awareness and understanding; (3) the relationship between language and culture in intercultural communication; and (4) recommendations for future cross-cultural exchange programs.

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The themes were then interpreted in relation to Byram's (2021) ICC framework and Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate the interpretations and retain participants' perspectives in the presentation of the findings.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers considered the themes in relation to the full set of responses rather than treating the frequency of a particular statement as sufficient evidence of its importance. The analysis therefore sought to interpret the meanings participants attached to their experiences within the specific context of the Indonesian–Japanese exchange program. The resulting themes provide a qualitative account of participants' reported experiences and perceptions; they are not presented as a direct measurement of changes in intercultural communicative competence.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers strictly adhered to ethical principles in qualitative research to ensure the protection and dignity of all participants. The following ethical measures were implemented:

1. **Informed Consent and Voluntariness**: Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. The act of completing and submitting the questionnaire was formally recognized as the participants' informed consent.
2. **Anonymity and Privacy**: To maintain the highest level of privacy, no personal identifying information (such as names or student IDs) was collected. All data were anonymized prior to the analysis stage, ensuring that individual responses could not be traced back to specific participants.
3. **Confidentiality and Data Management**: All collected data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team for academic purposes. Findings are reported only in aggregate form to further safeguard the confidentiality of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses from 14 undergraduate students who participated in the two-day Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program identified four themes: (1) positive intercultural learning experiences, (2) cultural awareness and understanding, (3) the relationship between language and culture in intercultural communication, and (4) recommendations for future cross-cultural exchange programs. The themes summarize participants' reported experiences, reflections, and suggestions following their participation in the program.

Theme 1. Positive Intercultural Learning Experiences

Participants described their experiences during the exchange program as enjoyable, meaningful, and informative. Their responses included positive evaluations of the program and highlighted opportunities to interact directly with students from different cultural backgrounds.

One participant stated, "*The experience was fun and memorable*."

Another participant commented, "*My overall experience of the Cross-Cultural Exchange Seminar was very positive and meaningful. The seminar was well-organized and provided valuable insights into different cultures*."

Participants also described cultural presentations, collaborative discussions, and informal conversations as important parts of their experience. Their responses indicated that they valued the opportunity to communicate directly with students from another cultural background. Overall, the responses reflected positive evaluations of

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the program and its intercultural learning activities.

These findings indicate that authentic face-to-face interaction provides an emotionally engaging learning environment that supports the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Theme 2. Increased Cultural Awareness and Understanding

Participants reported gaining insights into Indonesian and Japanese cultures, including cultural backgrounds, communication styles, social values, and everyday practices. Some responses also highlighted similarities between students from the two cultural backgrounds.

One participant explained, "*I gained new knowledge about how cultural backgrounds influence communication styles, values, and daily behavior*."

Another participant noted, "*I gained a lot of insights from the Kanto Gakuin students. I noticed that we have a lot of things in common*."

These responses indicate that authentic intercultural interaction encouraged students to move beyond superficial cultural observations toward a deeper understanding of how culture shapes communication and interpersonal relationships. Participants became more aware that cultural differences should not be viewed as barriers but as opportunities for learning and mutual understanding. At the same time, recognizing shared values helped reduce preconceived stereotypes and fostered greater empathy and respect for people from different cultural backgrounds.

This finding represents an important contribution to the literature on intercultural communication because it provides qualitative evidence from an Indonesian–Japanese higher education partnership, a context that has received relatively limited scholarly attention. By capturing participants' lived experiences through open-ended reflections, this study reveals how authentic face-to-face interaction enables students to negotiate cultural meanings, recognize shared human values, and challenge stereotypes in ways that may not be fully captured through quantitative measures of intercultural competence.

Theme 3. Understanding the Relationship between Language and Culture

Participants' responses also addressed the relationship between language and culture. In particular, one participant emphasized the importance of cultural context in communication.

One participant reflected, *"Language is closely connected to culture, and understanding cultural context helps improve communication and avoid misunderstandings."*

Another participant stated, *"The speakers opened my eyes and made me realize the importance of studying and trying new things."*

These reflections indicate that the exchange program encouraged students to reconsider their understanding of language learning. Rather than viewing English merely as a tool for communication, participants increasingly perceived language as a medium through which cultural values, identities, and worldviews are expressed. Through direct interaction with peers from different cultural backgrounds, students experienced how communication strategies, expressions, gestures, politeness, and conversational norms are shaped by cultural contexts. Such experiences enabled them to recognize that intercultural communication requires both linguistic knowledge and cultural sensitivity to achieve mutual understanding.

Theme 4. Recommendations for Future Cross-Cultural Exchange Programs

Participants offered several suggestions for future Indonesian–Japanese cross-cultural exchange programs. These included increasing the number of participants, extending the program, providing more opportunities for informal interaction and collaborative activities, and arranging reciprocal visits between the partner universities. Some participants also suggested maintaining contact through online

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meetings, collaborative academic projects, and language partnerships.

One participant suggested, *"I hope that in the next cross-cultural exchange seminar we'll have even more participants. I also hope that UNSADA students can visit Japan."*

Several participants also emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for sustained intercultural relationships beyond the formal program. They proposed follow-up online meetings, collaborative academic projects, language partnerships, and reciprocal exchange visits as ways to maintain communication and deepen intercultural understanding after the completion of the exchange. These recommendations indicate that participants viewed intercultural competence as a continuous developmental process rather than an outcome achieved through a single educational event.

These findings suggest that authentic intercultural learning extends beyond structured academic activities. While seminars and cultural presentations provide valuable knowledge, participants perceived informal conversations, collaborative problem-solving, and shared social experiences as equally important for developing meaningful intercultural relationships. Such interactions allowed students to negotiate cultural meanings naturally, build interpersonal trust, and apply communication strategies in real-life contexts. Consequently, future exchange programs should balance formal instructional components with opportunities for spontaneous social interaction that encourage genuine intercultural engagement.

Intercultural Learning through Short-Term Face-to-Face Interaction

The findings suggest that the two-day Indonesian–Japanese Cross-Cultural Exchange Program provided participants with opportunities to engage in intercultural learning through direct interaction. Participants described the experience positively and identified cultural presentations, discussions, and informal conversations as valuable parts of the program. These responses suggest that short-term exchange activities can create meaningful opportunities for students to encounter different cultural perspectives within a limited period. However, positive evaluations of the program should not be interpreted as direct evidence of measurable improvement in intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

This finding can be interpreted through Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of concrete experience and reflection in learning. In this program, face-to-face interaction offered students opportunities to encounter cultural perspectives beyond those presented in classroom materials. Their questionnaire responses also provided evidence of reflection on these encounters. Nevertheless, because the data were collected through post-program open-ended questionnaires, the study does not establish whether participants completed all stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle or how their learning developed over time.

The findings are broadly consistent with previous research discussed in this study. Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) emphasize the educational value of international collaborative learning, while Hackett et al. (2023) highlight the relevance of intercultural interaction to students' communication and collaborative experiences. The present study adds a context-specific perspective by examining students' accounts of a short, face-to-face exchange between Indonesian and Japanese university students. Rather than establishing that a two-day program is as effective as longer international programs, the findings indicate that meaningful intercultural learning experiences can be reported even within a brief exchange.

This distinction is important for higher education institutions with limited time or resources for international mobility. Short-term exchanges may serve as an

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accessible starting point for intercultural engagement, particularly when they include opportunities for direct communication and shared activities. Their educational value is likely to depend on the quality of interaction, the design of learning activities, and opportunities for continued reflection rather than duration alone.

Positive Intercultural Learning Experiences

The first theme highlights the importance participants attached to direct interaction with students from different cultural backgrounds. Their descriptions of the program as enjoyable, memorable, and meaningful suggest that the opportunity to communicate face-to-face was a valued aspect of the exchange. Cultural presentations, collaborative discussions, and informal conversations provided settings in which participants could engage with peers beyond their usual classroom environment.

This finding can be interpreted through Byram's (2021) ICC framework, particularly the dimension of *savoir être*, which emphasizes curiosity, openness, and a willingness to engage with people from other cultural backgrounds. Participants' positive accounts suggest that the exchange created opportunities for such engagement. Nevertheless, positive evaluations alone do not establish that participants developed all dimensions of intercultural competence or that any changes were sustained after the program.

The finding is consistent with Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023), whose work examines intercultural competencies in higher education, and Hackett et al. (2023), who investigate collaborative online international learning and intercultural competence development. These studies provide relevant points of comparison regarding the educational value of intercultural engagement. The present study adds a qualitative account of participants' perceptions in a short-term, face-to-face Indonesian–Japanese exchange context. Rather than demonstrating that face-to-face interaction is more effective than virtual exchange or longer programs, the findings show that participants regarded the direct interaction provided by this particular program as meaningful.

Cultural Awareness and Understanding

The second theme concerns participants' reported insights into Indonesian and Japanese cultures. Their reflections addressed cultural backgrounds, communication styles, social values, traditions, everyday practices, and similarities between the two groups. These accounts suggest that participants considered both cultural differences and shared experiences important aspects of the exchange.

Byram's (2021) ICC framework offers a useful perspective for interpreting these responses, particularly the dimension of *savoirs*, or knowledge of social groups and their cultural practices. Participants' reflections indicate that they gained or recognized cultural information through interaction with their peers. Their observations about similarities between cultures also suggest that intercultural encounters can provide opportunities to reconsider assumptions about cultural difference. However, the questionnaire responses do not independently establish the extent to which participants changed their attitudes or overcame particular stereotypes.

The findings can also be considered in relation to Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through experience and reflection. In the exchange program, cultural presentations, discussions, and interpersonal encounters provided experiences that participants subsequently described in their written responses. These reflections offer insight into what participants regarded as meaningful learning. However, because the study did not follow participants over time, it cannot confirm whether their reported insights developed into lasting changes in cultural understanding or future behavior.

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The findings are broadly relevant to previous research on intercultural learning in higher education, including Gutiérrez-Santiuste and Ritacco-Real (2023) and Paige et al. (2022), as discussed in the manuscript. The contribution of the present study lies in documenting participants' perspectives within a specific Indonesian–Japanese university partnership. The results therefore complement broader discussions of intercultural education by illustrating the kinds of cultural insights participants reported after a short exchange, rather than establishing the superiority of a particular exchange format.

The Relationship Between Language and Culture in Intercultural Communication

The third theme highlights participants' recognition that communication involves more than linguistic knowledge. Their reflections connected language use with cultural values, communication norms, and contextual meanings. This finding is particularly relevant to language and culture education because it indicates that participants regarded cultural understanding as an important part of interpreting messages and avoiding misunderstandings.

Byram's (2021) framework provides a basis for discussing this finding through the dimensions of *savoir comprendre* and *savoir apprendre/faire*, which concern interpreting and relating cultural perspectives and discovering information through interaction. Participants' comments suggest that the exchange encouraged them to reflect on how cultural context can shape communication. Their accounts, however, do not establish how consistently they applied these insights in actual intercultural communication beyond the program.

Kolb's (2015) Experiential Learning Theory also offers a relevant interpretive perspective. Direct communication and shared activities provided concrete experiences, while participants' written responses recorded their reflections on those experiences. The data therefore offer evidence of reported reflection, but they do not establish that every stage of Kolb's learning cycle was completed or that participants demonstrated measurable changes in communicative competence.

This theme complements the studies discussed in the manuscript, including Paige et al. (2022) and Hackett et al. (2023), which address intercultural experiences and communication-related learning. The present findings draw attention to the relationship between language and culture as perceived by participants in a specific face-to-face exchange. For language education, this suggests the value of providing students with opportunities to use language in culturally situated interactions, alongside explicit reflection on how context influences meaning. Such activities can complement classroom instruction, although their effects would need to be investigated more directly to establish their impact on ICC development.

Recommendations for Future Cross-Cultural Exchange Programs

The fourth theme adds a practical dimension to the findings. Participants recommended extending the program, increasing opportunities for informal interaction, including more collaborative activities, arranging reciprocal visits, and maintaining contact after the exchange. These suggestions indicate that participants valued the opportunity to interact with peers from another cultural background and expressed interest in continuing that engagement.

The recommendations can be considered in relation to Byram's (2021) emphasis on developing intercultural competence through engagement with other cultural perspectives. They also relate to Kolb's (2015) view of learning as an ongoing process in which experiences and reflection can inform subsequent learning. Participants' interest in follow-up activities suggests that they saw potential value in continued interaction beyond the initial event. Nevertheless, these recommendations represent participants' preferences; they do not establish which program components

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would produce the greatest learning outcomes.

The suggestions are also relevant to previous research on intercultural engagement and collaborative learning, including Hackett et al. (2023) and Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023). In practical terms, the findings suggest that universities could consider combining face-to-face exchange activities with follow-up discussions, collaborative projects, language partnerships, and opportunities for reciprocal visits. Such activities may help sustain contact between participating students, but their feasibility and educational outcomes would need to be evaluated in future research.

For the partner institutions, these findings provide participant-informed suggestions for planning future exchanges. They highlight the importance of considering not only the activities delivered during a program but also the opportunities participants have to interact informally and maintain contact afterward. The findings should be treated as a basis for program planning and further evaluation rather than as evidence that a particular design guarantees improved intercultural competence.

Overall Implications and Limitations

The findings offer several practical implications for short-term intercultural exchange programs in higher education. The first set of implications is directly based on participants' experiences and suggestions. Participants expressed interest in extending the program, increasing opportunities for informal interaction and collaborative activities, arranging reciprocal visits, and maintaining communication through online meetings and joint academic activities. These suggestions provide practical input for universities seeking to improve future Indonesian–Japanese exchange programs. They reflect participants' preferences and perceived needs rather than evidence that these measures would necessarily produce better intercultural learning outcomes.

The study's contribution is its context-specific qualitative account of how 14 undergraduate students understood and evaluated a two-day face-to-face exchange. The findings can inform discussion of how universities design intercultural activities, particularly when opportunities for longer international mobility are limited. However, the study did not compare different exchange formats, measure ICC before and after participation, or assess whether reported learning persisted over time. It therefore cannot establish that the program caused measurable or lasting improvements in intercultural communicative competence, or that short-term exchanges are as effective as longer programs.

Overall, this study contributes to understanding short-term intercultural exchange by providing qualitative insights into how Indonesian undergraduate students perceived and reflected on a two-day face-to-face exchange with Japanese university students. Beyond documenting positive experiences and reported cultural learning, the findings highlight participants' awareness of the relationship between language and culture and their interest in continued intercultural engagement. By examining a specific Indonesian–Japanese higher education partnership, the study adds a context-specific perspective to research on intercultural learning in short-term exchange settings. The findings suggest that brief exchanges can provide meaningful opportunities for cultural engagement and reflection, while emphasizing the potential value of follow-up activities and continued collaboration. For higher education institutions, these insights highlight the importance of designing exchange programs that combine direct interaction with opportunities for reflection and sustained engagement. Nevertheless, further research is needed to determine whether the learning experiences reported by participants lead to lasting changes in intercultural understanding and communication practices. Future studies could address this limitation by collecting

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data before and after an exchange, conducting follow-up interviews, and examining participants' experiences over a longer period. Research involving additional student cohorts and institutional partnerships could also explore how specific program activities and opportunities for continued interaction relate to intercultural learning. Such approaches would help establish whether participants' immediate post-exchange perceptions correspond to sustained changes in intercultural communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the qualitative intercultural communication experiences of undergraduate students participating in a two-day Indonesian–Japanese cross-cultural exchange program. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that brief, highly focused face-to-face exchanges can serve as effective experiential catalysts for fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Through authentic interpersonal interactions, students actively negotiated cultural meanings, enhanced their critical cultural awareness, and realized the intrinsic connection between language and culture. Rather than viewing short-term duration as a limitation, the results indicate that the quality, immediacy, and authenticity of direct engagement play a pivotal role in stimulating meaningful intercultural reflection.

The first theme, positive intercultural learning experiences, highlights the importance of direct interaction in creating opportunities for students to communicate beyond formal classroom activities. Participants described the exchange as enjoyable and meaningful, suggesting that face-to-face encounters offered a setting in which they could engage with peers from different cultural backgrounds. In relation to Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence framework, these accounts are consistent with the importance of openness and curiosity toward other cultures. Positive evaluations of the program do not necessarily indicate that all dimensions of intercultural competence were fully developed within two days.

The second and third themes provide further insight into the nature of this learning. Participants reported gaining new perspectives on Indonesian and Japanese cultures and recognizing that language use is closely connected to cultural values, communication norms, and social contexts. These reflections suggest that intercultural learning involved more than acquiring factual information about another country. Direct interaction encouraged participants to consider how cultural backgrounds may influence communication and how meaning can depend on context as well as linguistic form. This interpretation is consistent with Byram's emphasis on intercultural knowledge and the ability to interpret and relate cultural perspectives.

The findings can also be considered in relation to Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. The exchange provided concrete experiences through cultural presentations, collaborative activities, and interpersonal communication. Participants' written reflections offered evidence of how they interpreted these experiences and identified new cultural insights. Nevertheless, because the study collected post-program questionnaire responses rather than longitudinal data, it cannot establish whether these reflections developed into sustained changes in attitudes or communication practices. The findings therefore illustrate participants' perceived learning experiences rather than verify a complete experiential learning cycle or objectively measured competence development.

The fourth theme, recommendations for future exchange programs, adds a practical dimension to these findings. Participants suggested extending the exchange, providing more opportunities for informal interaction, incorporating collaborative activities, and maintaining contact after the program. Some also expressed interest in reciprocal visits

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between the partner universities. These suggestions indicate that participants valued the opportunity to interact across cultural boundaries and wished to continue the relationships and learning beyond the two-day event. Importantly, these recommendations represent participants' preferences and experiences; they do not independently establish which program components would produce the greatest learning outcomes.

This study contributes a context-specific qualitative account of how 14 Indonesian and Japanese undergraduate students perceived a short-term, face-to-face intercultural exchange in higher education. Its contribution lies in documenting the connections participants made between direct interaction, cultural awareness, language use, and their desire for continued engagement. The findings suggest that even a two-day exchange can provide meaningful opportunities for intercultural reflection, while also indicating that participants see value in extending contact beyond the event itself.

The Indonesian–Japanese context is important because the study captures participants' reflections within a specific university partnership rather than treating intercultural exchange as a uniform experience across settings. The results offer a basis for understanding how students experience and interpret such initiatives, but they should not be generalized to all Indonesian or Japanese students or taken as proof of the effectiveness of short-term exchange programs in producing lasting competence gains. Further research involving larger and more diverse participant groups, pre- and post-program data, and follow-up interviews could examine whether the perceptions reported here correspond to sustained changes in intercultural attitudes and communication practices.

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