Promoting Cross-Cultural Integration: A Comparative Analysis of Japanese and International Students in Integrated English Classes

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Abstract

As Japan faces changing demographics and declining university enrollments, there are renewed calls to internationalize universities to attract international students and equip graduates for a more globalized society. While previous research has explored internationalization efforts and multiculturalism on university campuses, little is known about how Japanese and international students perceive culturally integrated English language classes and the specific benefits and challenges. This paper addresses this gap by examining the experiences, benefits, and challenges Japanese and international students encounter in integrated language classes at a university in the Kansai area. A mixed-methods approach analyzes data collected from 109 Japanese and international students, utilizing a structured survey with Likert-scale and open-ended questions measuring participants' perceptions and experiences. Follow-up interviews were conducted with participants from each group to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative data. The results reveal that although both groups recognize the value of diverse perspectives and cultural exchange, international students benefit more in language proficiency and developing interpersonal skills. In contrast, Japanese students experience more challenges in English communication and group participation. This study underscores the merits of culturally integrated language education, with implications that extend beyond Japan. It offers insights for institutions in non-English-dominated settings undergoing internationalization efforts as they adapt to equip students to function in a more globalized future.

Keywords: internationalization, intercultural competence, interpersonal skills development, culturally integrated classrooms

Introduction

Internationalization has become increasingly important to Japanese education policies (Gurney & Michaud, 2024; Yonezawa, 2023). Through strategic investments, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has sought to globalize higher education and attract

international students, starting with the International Student 100,000 Plan (1983-1995) (MEXT, n.d.), followed by the Global 30 Project (2009-2012), the Top Global University Project (2014-2021) (MEXT, n.d.), and the Strategic Promotion of International Student Exchange Initiative (launched in 2022). Currently, MEXT aims to draw in 300,000 international students by 2030 in a renewed effort to improve Japan's standing as a major destination for research and education (MEXT, 2022).

Previous studies suggest this movement is driven by various factors, including changing demographics, a shrinking population, and the need to create a more competitive, globalized workforce (Kobayashi, 2021; Liu-Farrer & Shire, 2023; Yonezawa, 2019; Yonezawa, 2023). Some universities are increasingly accepting more international students to maintain enrollment levels and financial stability, particularly in the context of Japan's declining youth population and under-capacity at many institutions (Yonezawa, 2019). Relaxed visa policies, scholarships, and support services have been implemented to encourage international students to study in Japan. International student numbers temporarily declined during COVID-19 but have since rebounded due to internationalization efforts (Adilgazinova et al., 2024; Mazumi, 2023; Yonezawa, 2023).

While Japanese universities have taken significant measures toward internationalization, their success has been met with mixed perceptions and impressions. Some view these initiatives as essential for strengthening global competitiveness and advancing cultural exchange (e.g., Vosse, 2019; Yonezawa, 2019), while others criticize them for lacking substance in integrating internationalization into the curriculum (e.g., Kariya, 2024; Hofmeyr, 2023). Nonetheless, the current trends and ongoing push reflect a national commitment to positioning Japan as a more prominent player in global education. According to Bosio (2023), Japan is implementing policies to encourage more students to study abroad, internationalize universities, and recruit overseas talent. Part of this push is through promoting Global Citizenship Education (GCE) into curricula, which aims to develop "the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that learners need to be able to contribute to a more inclusive, just and peaceful world" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 15). to provide students with communicative competencies applicable in the globalized world. This emphasis on global citizenship and cultural adeptness reflects a broader effort to move beyond token internationalization initiatives and toward meaningful curricular reforms that provide students with the skills to navigate and contribute to an increasingly interconnected world.

Considering these developments, the authors' university has seen a significant increase in international student enrollments (excluding exchange programs), rising from 0.88% in 2015 to 5.41% in 2024 (Shozaichibetsuninzuhyo, 2024), intending to reach 15% by 2030. This shift has led to a substantial rise in international learners enrolling in English language and content-based courses, resulting in some classes where native Japanese students are now in the minority. The university offers elective English language courses at four levels (basic to advanced) and content-based courses for advanced and native English-speaking students. All participants in this study were enrolled in these classes and randomly selected from four faculties: Faculty of Architecture &Arts, Faculty of

Intercultural Japanese Studies, Faculty of Business Administration, and Faculty of Global Nursing.

This evolving demographic presents a unique opportunity to better serve an increasingly diverse student body, examining the perspectives of students enrolled in culturally integrated English language classes. Therefore, this study aims to understand the dynamics of the experiences, benefits, and challenges faced by Japanese and International students in culturally integrated classes. We analyze quantitative and qualitative data on four areas: experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and group interactions to understand how these factors influence their learning outcomes. In this study, "benefits" refer to positive academic and social gains learners can acquire from integration, while "challenges refer to obstacles that can affect their experiences, such as language and cultural barriers. We believe this analysis will provide valuable insights into the future of language education in Japan, highlighting the transformative potential of integrated classrooms. By understanding the perspectives of both groups, we can advocate for the continued promotion of integrated language classes as a vital component of higher education. This study has implications beyond academia as it provides practical insights that can inform policy and curriculum design, enabling educators to support diverse student populations and promote more inclusive and globally minded learning environments.

In the framework of this study, 'cross-cultural integration' refers to the process in which international and Japanese students engage in meaningful interactions within integrated language classes. This concept focuses on collaboration, mutual exchange, and enhancing cultural understanding while maintaining unique cultural perspectives. It differs from 'intercultural integration' in that it does not imply a process of international students experiencing a deeper adaptation to the dominant culture. Instead, cross-cultural integration in this context highlights the creation of shared learning environments where varied cultural perspectives coexist and impact learners' educational experiences.

Literature Review

As internationalization expands in higher education, greater diversity within student populations raises the probability of learners participating in more culturally integrated classes. This section reviews existing literature on the merits of such classes, highlighting how integration in culturally diverse learning environments can improve key cultural competencies. Research on such classes primarily focuses on the benefits of mixed group work and collaboration, while some studies highlight the barriers and difficulties. Nonetheless, these studies collectively contend that incorporating cultural components into collaborative learning enhances understanding and interpersonal skills, such as intercultural competence (e.g., Bosio, 2023; Bosio & Torres, 2019; Clifford & Montgomery, 2017; de Hei et al., 2020; Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya (2023), communication adeptness (e.g., Liang & Schartner, 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Popov et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2017; Vromans et al., 2023), critical thinking and problem-solving (e.g., Barak & Yuan 2021; Cotton et al., 2013; Denson & Zhang, 2010; Schwarzenthal et al., 2020), professional preparedness (e.g., Coelen & Gribble (Eds), 2019; Griffith et al., 2016; Jones, 2019; Mellors-Bourne, 2015; Pinto, 2018), and personal growth (e.g.

Cotton et al., 2013; Glass, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Liang & Schartner, 2022; Poort et al., 2022; Schwarzenthal et al., 2020; Vromans et al., 2023), all of which are valued more than ever in today's interconnected world.

Intercultural Competency

Intercultural competency is increasingly recognized as a valuable asset for student development and better international understanding. Over the past two decades, higher education has increased its emphasis on Global Citizen Education (GCE), which instills knowledge of global, national, and local issues (Bosio, 2023; Bosio & Torres, 2019; Clifford & Montgomery, 2017). This shift has resulted in many Japanese universities incorporating terms such as global education and global citizenship into their mission statements. Increasingly, institutions are adding global perspectives into the curricula, such as learning about world issues, respecting other cultures, and enhancing English-language abilities (Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012; Oxley & Morris, 2013; Pais & Acosta, 2020). They recognize that when students of varied backgrounds come together, they are exposed to different viewpoints and communication styles. Such interaction can enhance cultural understanding and versatility – skills essential for effective communication – as students learn to value and navigate differences in communication styles, conduct, and values (Cotton et al., 2013; de Hei et al., 2020; Denson & Zhang, 2010). Through engagement in the classroom, students can develop better empathy, flexibility, and the capacity to listen and respond appropriately to varied viewpoints and cultural perspectives (de Hei et al., 2020; Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023; Krajewsky, 2011). A more encompassing environment that inspires students to learn from their cultural differences further increases the capacity to communicate across cultures.

One of the most well-known theoretical models in this field is Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, which frames intercultural adeptness as a circular, non-linear cycle. It begins with foundational attitudes such as openness, respect, and curiosity. These attributes support internal outcomes such as empathy, flexibility, and adaptability, ultimately resulting in more adequate and appropriate intercultural behavior. According to Deardorff (2006), a part of becoming culturally competent can also include dealing with discomfort, ambiguity, and cultural stress, which is not a negative result but a necessary part of becoming culturally adept. As learners regularly engage with differences and unfamiliar norms, this process stimulates adaptive thinking and deeper understanding.

Communication Adeptness

While developing intercultural competence enables learners to understand and appreciate cultural differences, effective communication is the means through which they can express understanding and express themselves in collaborative settings. To better understand how communication adeptness is effective in culturally mixed group work, it is important to examine

students' challenges, such as different communication styles, language barriers, and stereotyping. Previous studies highlight potential communication barriers that students may experience while engaging in culturally integrated group work (e.g., Liang & Schartner, 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Popov et al., 2019; Reid et al., 2017; Vromans et al., 2023). Misconceptions and misunderstandings can occur due to differing modes of interacting, communicating, or working, such as individualistic versus collectivist mindsets or task-oriented against relationship-oriented approaches (Economides, 2008; Szydło et al., 2020). Language barriers can also complicate interactions, as students encounter unfamiliar accents or feel insecure about using English as the primary medium of communication (Poort et al., 2022; Popov et al., 2014; Volet & Ang, 2012). Additionally, generalizing or stereotyping specific groups can cause unease, particularly when new information or experiences challenge pre-existing beliefs (Vromans et al., 2023).

Despite the challenges, a considerable body of literature asserts that learning in culturally mixed groups can significantly bolster invaluable communication skills such as language proficiency, non-verbal communication, and active listening (e.g., Denson & Zhang, 2010; Glass, 2012; Johnson et al., 2023). Another significant benefit of culturally diverse collaborations is the chance for students to learn from various perspectives (Sawir, 2013). Such collaborations can enhance academic and social adaptation, fostering a sense of inclusivity and building diversified networks (Liang & Schartner, 2022). Ultimately, the experience of engaging with cultural differences within mixed groups can hone communication skills and prepare students for the complexities of life after school in an increasingly connected world.

Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving

Building on communication adeptness, exposure to differing viewpoints can encourage students to think critically and develop innovative approaches to problem-solving (Busse & Krause, 2015; Zalli, 2024). Studies show that when students are challenged to consider multiple views and approaches to problem-solving, exposure to diverse perspectives encourages more creative and critical thinking (e.g., Cotton et al., 2013; Denson & Zhang, 2010; King et al., 2013). Meaningful interactions often occur when homogeneous groups learn to overcome cultural barriers and step outside their comfort zones. Mixed group work creates an environment conducive to considering various viewpoints, resulting in fresh ideas and insights (Barak & Yuan, 2021). Moreover, exposure to diverse backgrounds enables students to reflect more deeply on complex issues, enhancing their capacity to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information – key components of critical thinking and problem-solving. It also enhances the ability to navigate linguistic and cultural nuances, which is essential for interpreting social situations and making informed decisions (Krajewsky, 2011). However, this depends on an amiable and inclusive environment where students can feel valued and respected (Denson & Zhang, 2010). Such interactions can encourage learners to question their presumptions, consider contrasting attitudes and outlooks, and develop a broader understanding of the world.

Navigating difficulties, such as language barriers and misunderstandings, can be integral to cultural awareness and the overall learning process.

Professional Preparedness Through Language Learning

The cumulative effect of intercultural competence, communication adeptness, and critical thinking directly contribute to professional readiness. Employers increasingly expect employees to function in multicultural environments and communicate across cultural lines to succeed (Fitzsimmons et al., 2017). Multiple studies contend that developing intercultural competence prepares students for their future professions (e.g., Coelen & Gribble (Eds), 2019; Griffith et al., 2016; Jones, 2019; Mellors-Bourne, 2015; Pinto, 2018). The literature maintains that higher education should equip students for the ever-changing global landscape where employers value intercultural communication skills linked to close teamwork, problem-solving, and flexibility in various settings (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Such skills are important for professional development as they enable future workers to collaborate effectively in culturally diverse teams, acclimate to varied work environments, and deal with complex situations in the workforce (Bates, 2024; De Castro et al., 2019; Iskhakova & Ott, 2020). Intercultural collaboration in the classroom can effectively simulate real-world scenarios, helping students overcome language barriers and prepare them for the workforce (Holubnycha et al., 2019). Moreover, culturally adept graduates can excel in managing international business situations and interacting with clients from different backgrounds, contributing to better cooperation, communication, and adaptability (Jones, 2019). Such abilities are crucial to educational preparedness as the world becomes more interdependent and economically connected (Bates, 2024; Bilderback & Thompson, 2025; Mansilla et al., 2013). Therefore, developing cross-cultural preparedness in higher education is not only beneficial but imperative for students to thrive in an ever-increasing interconnected world.

Personal Growth

Beyond educational and professional outcomes, culturally integrated learning environments can also foster transformative personal growth. Research shows that culturally integrated classes do more than provide opportunities to gain knowledge of other cultures; they also inspire personal growth by motivating students to become more open-minded, tolerant, and empathetic, resulting in a broader worldview (e.g., Cotton et al., 2013; Glass, 2012; Liang & Schartner, 2022; Schwarzenthal et al., 2020). Students navigating diverse environments may encounter challenges reconciling different values and cultural norms, particularly in the host country. Such struggles are pivotal moments that foster growth as they develop greater adaptability and flexibility – attributes essential for personal development (Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Vromans et al., 2023). Moreover, as students build trust while overcoming cultural barriers, they enhance their cultural competence, contributing to their maturation and personal growth (Poort et al., 2022). Ultimately, students' experiences within culturally integrated classes can reshape students' academic paths and prepare them for the broader challenges of a

globalized society.

Addressing the Research Gap in Language Learning Contexts

While previous research has explored culturally mixed group work and collaboration, a notable gap exists in studies specifically focusing on culturally integrated English language classes. This gap is particularly evident in Japan and East Asia, where research in a language-learning context remains limited in this area. Despite Japanese universities theoretically promoting globalization, the pedagogical implementation of internationalization in curricula and classrooms has received relatively little attention. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by investigating the perceptions of students enrolled in intercultural English language classes. By building on existing research, we analyze student perceptions through quantitative and qualitative methods.

This study focuses on students' self-perceptions of their learning experiences. In the context of this paper, *perceived benefits* refer to students' self-reported feelings of how culturally integrated environments contribute to their learning, development, and intercultural awareness, rather than objectively measured outcomes. Understanding these perspectives can offer insight into what students value and how they view their learning experiences in diverse settings.

Through the following research questions, we seek to contribute to the evolving landscape of language education in Japan:

1. How do the perceptions of comfort, value, and self-assessed English proficiency differ between Japanese and international university students in integrated language classes, and what factors contribute the most to these differences?

2. How do group dynamics, including perceptions of teamwork, collaboration, ease of expressing ideas, and contribution equality, differ between Japanese and international university students in integrated language classes, and what factors contribute the most to these differences?

3. To what extent do Japanese and international university students perceive benefits from integrated language classes, including contributions to a richer learning environment, exposure to diverse perspectives, improvement in language and communication skills, and cultural understanding, for both Japanese and international university students, and how do these perceptions vary between the two groups?

4. What are the most commonly experienced challenges by Japanese and international university students in integrated language classes, such as communication barriers, differences in learning approaches, risk of cultural misunderstandings, and difficulties in understanding counterparts?

5. To what extent do Japanese and international university students perceive cultural exchange and cultural competence as important elements of language classes, and to what extent do they believe these elements influence their overall educational experience?

Survey Development and Validation

To ensure reliability, ethical integrity, and participant protections, this study was carried out with careful attention to institutional approval standards and informed consent procedures. As the project involved human subjects research, the investigators obtained approval from the university's institutional review board. The approved materials included survey questions and consent forms, prepared in Japanese and English to ensure comprehension. Paper consent forms were printed in both languages to guarantee informed consent and anonymity before conducting the survey.

Before conducting the survey, a Delphi study (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963) was conducted to refine and strengthen the survey's reliability. The analysis considered reflections among three project researchers and three outside professionals, all of whom were university educators with experience in teaching culturally integrated classes and expertise in research methodologies and second-language acquisition. Their collaboration resulted in unanimity on the substance and wording of all survey questions and helped ensure that the questionnaire accurately captured the study's linguistic and cultural integration aspects.

The Delphi study resulted in 22 items, which were divided into five segments: Integration Experience (5 questions), Group Dynamics (4 questions), Benefits (5 questions), Challenges (4 questions), and Importance of Cultural Exchange (4 questions). The questions were compiled into a Google Forms survey, composed in Japanese and English, and reviewed by native-language professionals.

The next pre-study step was distributing the student consent forms to obtain permission and documentation. Participation was voluntary, and students could drop out at any time to mitigate any potential coercion, especially given the investigators' role as their instructors. Sensitivity to cultural differences was prioritized to ensure respect for participants' cultural values and minimize potential biases in the study design, data collection, and interpretation to minimize undue influence or harm. Permission forms were securely stored by the lead investigator and set to be destroyed 36 months after the project's conclusion. Names or other identifying information were not collected.

Analysis

Quantitative data from the Google Form survey were analyzed using independent samples t-tests to compare the responses of Japanese and international students across the five survey segments. The significance level was set at $p<0.05$. For each item, the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), t-value, degrees of freedom (df), p-value, and effect size (Cohen's d) were calculated. The t-tests were chosen to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between the two groups on the six-point Likert-scale items, as these items identified key aspects of students' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions in culturally integrated classes. The six-point scale used to capture nuanced responses while avoiding a middle point, such as '3' on a five-point scale, which can result in non-committal answers. Omitting a middle option encouraged participants to consider their choices more deeply and

make a clearer stance by leaning toward 'agree' or 'disagree.' By identifying differences directly related to the research questions, potential gaps in integration, areas of similarity, and notable benefits and challenges perceived by each group. The mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for each survey item to summarize response distributions, along with t-values, degrees of freedom (df), and p-values to assess statistical significance. Cohen's d was reported to quantify the degree of the differences observed.

Additionally, quantitative data were complemented through two follow-up video conference interviews to provide deeper insights into qualitative data. Volunteers came from a pool of selected participants who had taken multiple culturally integrated classes, as their broader experience could allow them to reflect more deeply on long-term impacts and recurring patterns. While this procedure favored depth over generalizability, it allowed for richer perspectives based on experience and aligned with the research aims.

To mitigate researcher bias in data interpretation, student quotes were presented as close to the original as possible to preserve authenticity, including grammatical errors when participants' original phrasing was clear. However, some quotes were lightly edited if grammatical errors and word choice significantly impacted readability or understanding without altering the original meaning or tone. Although formal screening was not conducted, caution was taken to avoid imposing assumptions and to ensure that key themes emerged naturally.

Participants

The sample population for the survey consisted of 109 voluntary responses, with 63.3% (N=69) being Japanese and 36.7% (N=40) international students. Among the respondents, 56% (N = 61) were female, 43.1% (N = 47) were male, and 0.9% (N = 1) identified as non-binary. The international students represented countries such as Bangladesh, China, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted with three Japanese and three international students to directly compare their experiences, interactions, and perceptions within an integrated learning environment.

Results

Integrated Experience

For the first section on integrated experience, the dependent variables were responses to survey items 1.1-1.5, measured on a six-point Likert scale to gauge participants' perceptions of their integrated experience. This included comfort, value, and self-assessed English proficiency.

The quantitative results show that Japanese and international students reported feeling comfortable interacting in culturally integrated classes. However, Japanese students felt less discomfort compared to international students, indicating that international students may experience more

challenges in cross-cultural interactions. International students felt slightly more valued in integrated classes than Japanese students, but this difference was not statistically significant. On the other hand, there was a clear difference in perceived English proficiency, with international students feeling more confident compared to Japanese students.

There were no significant differences between groups on Items 1.1, "I feel comfortable interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds in integrated classes," 1.2, "I feel hesitant to interact with students from different cultural backgrounds," and 1.4, "I feel valued as an international student/Japanese student in integrated language classes." (See Table 1.) However, Japanese participants experienced statistically significantly lower discomfort compared to international students in Item 1.3, "I feel uncomfortable interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds in integrated classes" ($p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.799$), indicating that international students face more challenges in cross-cultural interactions. Similarly, international students felt their English proficiency in Item 1.5, "I think my English level is adequate compared to the other members of my class," was significantly higher than that of Japanese students ($p < .001$m Cohen's $d = 1.320$).

Table 1

Integrated Experience - Independent Samples T-Test

Items	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
1.1	-0.248	107	0.804	-0.054	0.218	-0.049	0.198
1.2	-0.247	107	0.805	-0.074	0.300	-0.049	0.198
1.3	-4.042	107	< .001a	-0.993	0.246	-0.799	0.209
1.3 Welch	-3.694	62.978	< .001	-0.993	0.269	-0.762	0.208
1.4	-1.390	107	0.168	-0.395	0.284	-0.275	0.199
1.5	-6.674	107	< .001	-1.628	0.244	-1.320	0.228

Note. ª Brown-Forsythe test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the equal variance assumption. Therefore, a Welch's t-test was also conducted, as it does not assume equal variances and adjusts the degrees of freedom accordingly. Both tests showed the same significance.

Table 2

Integrated Experience - Group Descriptives

Items	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
1.1	Japanese	68	4.897	1.067	0.129	0.218

Table 2

Integrated Experience - Group Descriptives

Items	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
	International	41	4.951	1.161	0.181	0.234
1.2	Japanese	68	2.779	1.563	0.190	0.562
	International	41	2.854	1.442	0.225	0.505
1.3	Japanese	68	1.471	1.043	0.127	0.710
	International	41	2.463	1.518	0.237	0.616
1.4	Japanese	68	3.971	1.506	0.183	0.379
	International	41	4.366	1.318	0.206	0.302
1.5	Japanese	68	2.324	1.177	0.143	0.507
	International	41	3.951	1.322	0.206	0.335

The qualitative responses illustrate these trends. For example, Participant C, an international student, expressed how using a mix of Japanese and English makes her more comfortable:

For me, a comfortable moment is like this: Japanese is not my first language, so sometimes I cannot come up with some words in Japanese. But I can come up with some words in English. So, I can use English and Japanese mixed to talk to people. This is a very comfortable way for me to express what I want to say.

Participant E, another international student, shared:

I've learned English from primary school to high school, but in Chinese schools, we mainly focus on writing and testing. Speaking and listening are rarely emphasized. Actually, I find speaking and listening a bit difficult because I struggle to understand what others are saying. Sometimes, I also find it hard to express my thoughts. I can think of what I want to say, but it's difficult for me to speak it out. Compared to Japanese, I think English is better for communicating with foreign classmates.

In contrast, Participant D, a Japanese student, described initial nervousness:

When I was a first grader, I felt nervous, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Instead, I saw it as a challenge. At that time, there were many older students around me, which made me feel nervous. However, I'm comfortable with it now.

Group Dynamics

The second section on group dynamics centered on perceptions of working in integrated groups, with the dependent variables being responses to survey items 2.1-2.4. These items assessed the perceptions of teamwork, collaboration, ease of expressing ideas, and contributing equally to the learning process.

The quantitative results suggest that both groups agreed that integrated group work can lead to successful outcomes and improve collaboration. However, international students found expressing their ideas in mixed groups easier than Japanese students. There were no significant differences between groups for Item 2.1, "I think that groups work with a mix of international and Japanese students can lead to successful outcomes," and 2.2, "I feel that collaborating with students from diverse backgrounds improves overall teamwork." (see Table 3). On the other hand, significant differences were found for Items 2.3, "I find it easy to express my ideas in a group that includes international/Japanese students," and 2.4, "I can contribute equally to the group when working in integrated classes." (see Table 3). International students reported greater ease in expressing their ideas in mixed groups (Item 2.3, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.932$) and felt they could contribute more equally in groups compared to Japanese students (Item 2.4, $p = .005$, Cohen's $d = -0.574$). These results indicate that while both groups value integrated group work, Japanese students felt less adequate in contributing equally and voicing their ideas.

Table 3

Group Dynamics - Independent Samples T-Test

Items	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
2.1	-0.167	107	0.868	-0.039	0.237	-0.033	0.198
2.2	0.474	107	0.637	0.106	0.223	0.094	0.198
2.3	-4.716	107	< .001	-1.268	0.269	-0.932	0.213
2.3 Welch's	-5.004	99.622	< .001	-1.268	0.253	-0.960	0.214
2.4	-2.893	106	0.005[a]	-0.763	0.264	-0.574	0.204

Note. [a] Brown-Forsythe test is significant ($p < .05$), suggesting a violation of the equal variance assumption. Therefore, a Welch's t-test was also conducted, as it does not assume equal variances and adjusts the degrees of freedom accordingly. Both tests showed the same significance.

Table 4

Group Dynamics - Group Descriptives

Items	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
2.1	Japanese	68	4.912	1.129	0.137	0.230
	International	41	4.951	1.303	0.203	0.263
2.2	Japanese	68	4.691	1.136	0.138	0.242
	International	41	4.585	1.117	0.175	0.244
2.3	Japanese	68	3.074	1.469	0.178	0.478
	International	41	4.341	1.153	0.180	0.266
2.4	Japanese	67	3.896	1.499	0.183	0.385
	International	41	4.659	0.990	0.155	0.213

Qualitative data supported these findings. For example, Participant E, an international student, highlighted the benefits of learning from diverse group members:

I think mixed groups are great because they allow us to communicate with people from different countries. Through this, we can learn about various cultures and backgrounds, which I believe is very beneficial. It's an excellent opportunity to gain knowledge from others.

Conversely, Participant D, a Japanese student, reflected on initial hesitancy and embarrassment when speaking:

In the first class, I was really nervous, and I also felt hesitant and embarrassed about my English skills. However, everyone was friendly and supportive, and they helped me a lot. It was challenging for me, but I enjoyed the class, especially with the international students who also took it. They helped make the class fun.

Aligning with the survey data, these narratives indicate that while integrated group work can result in positive outcomes, additional support may be needed to help Japanese students gain confidence in expressing ideas and contributing to group-related tasks.

Benefits

The third section on benefits focused on the perceived advantages of working in integrated groups, with the dependent variables being responses to survey items 3.1-3.5. These benefits included contributions to a richer learning environment, exposure to diverse perspectives, improved language and communication skills, and better cultural understanding.

The quantitative results showed that both groups believed that the learning environment is richer compared to homogeneous classes and that exposure to different perspectives can improve the understanding of course content. International students reported higher benefits on Items 3.4 and 3.5, "Integrated classes help me develop a more global perspective," and "I feel that my cultural understanding improves when working with students from different backgrounds." However, these differences were not statistically significant (p = 0.321 and p = 0.147, respectively). On the other hand, Item 3.2, "Working in diverse groups enhances overall teamwork and collaboration," showed a significant difference (p = 0.040, Cohen's d = -0417), where international students expressed stronger agreement. (See Table 5.)

Table 5

Benefits - Independent Samples T-Test

Item	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
3.1	0.207	107	0.836	0.057	0.273	0.041	0.198
3.2	-2.078	105	0.040	-0.611	0.294	-0.417	0.204
3.3	0.559	107	0.578	0.125	0.223	0.110	0.198
3.4	0.997	107	0.321	0.225	0.226	0.197	0.198
3.5	1.462	107	0.147	0.333	0.228	0.289	0.199

Table 6

Benefits – Descriptives

Items	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
3.1	Japanese	68	4.618	1.393	0.169	0.302
	International	41	4.561	1.361	0.213	0.298
3.2	Japanese	68	3.132	1.525	0.185	0.487
	International	39	3.744	1.352	0.216	0.361
3.3	Japanese	68	4.588	1.187	0.144	0.259
	International	41	4.463	1.027	0.160	0.230

Table 6

Benefits – Descriptives

Items	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
3.4	Japanese	68	5.176	1.171	0.142	0.226
	International	41	4.951	1.094	0.171	0.221
3.5	Japanese	68	5.235	1.173	0.142	0.224
	International	41	4.902	1.114	0.174	0.227

Qualitative responses validated these findings. For example, Participant F, an international student, highlighted the advantages of exposure to varied cultural perspectives:

When you explain your idea or opinion, you may be surprised to find that what feels normal to you is different in other cultures and sometimes leads to discoveries about values and customs. You can get some new ideas and opinions from them. You can gain a deeper understanding of the different cultures, enhancing your ability to be more fully flexible in your thinking and behavior when interacting with others.

Correspondingly, Participant G, a Japanese student, noted:

At first, I found it hard to understand how others see things. But as I collaborated with students from different countries, I started to view things from other perspectives. It broadened my understanding of the world.

These comments underline the benefits of integrated classes in enhancing cultural knowledge and teamwork, reflecting the quantitative data that suggested a shared perception of the advantages of such environments.

Challenges

As opposed to the benefits, the fourth section on challenges focused on perceptions of challenges participants experienced, with the dependent variables being responses to survey items 4.1-4.5. These challenges included communication barriers, differences in learning approaches, the risk of cultural misunderstandings, and difficulty understanding their counterparts.

The quantitative results show that both groups acknowledged challenges such as language barriers and cultural misunderstandings. However, such a view was collectively neutral to slightly negative. The notable difference between the two groups is that Japanese students reported more difficulty working with international students due to differing learning styles. No significant

differences were evident in Item 4.1, "Language differences sometimes create barriers in communication" (p = 0.655, Cohen's d = 0.088), or Item 4.3, "There is a risk of cultural misunderstandings that may negatively affect group interactions" (pp = 0.069, Cohen's d = -o.363). Similarly, respondents showed no notable difference in Item 4.4, "I sometimes have difficulty understanding my counterparts" (p = 0.977, Cohen's d = 0.006). However, Item 4.2, "Differences in learning styles make it challenging to work effectively with others," showed a significant difference (p < 0.001, Cohen's d = -0.818), with Japanese students reporting greater difficulty than international students. (See Table 7.)

Qualitative responses highlighted the difficulty some students experienced when trying to understand their counterparts. For example, Participant E, an international student, shared her experience:

> *When they ask me something about my daily life or talk about their daily life, I can understand the topic from some keywords. But I don't fully understand the whole sentence or everything they are saying. I just pick out the keywords I know and try to answer. For example, in one of my classes, I have a classmate from India who is excellent, but I find it difficult to understand what he is saying.*

The combined quantitative and qualitative responses acknowledge challenges in integrated groups, although not significantly high. Moreover, the mean scores for the benefits are notably higher than those for the challenges for both groups. (See Tables 6 and 8.)

Table 7

Challenges – Independent Samples T-Test

Items	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
4.1	0.447	107	0.655	0.109	0.243	0.088	0.198
4.2	-4.124	106	< .001	-1.079	0.262	-0.818	0.210
4.3	-1.835	107	0.069	-0.431	0.235	-0.363	0.200
4.4	0.028	106	0.977	0.007	0.256	0.006	0.198

Table 8

Challenges – Group Descriptives

Items	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
4.1	Japanese	68	4.279	1.291	0.157	0.302
	International	41	4.171	1.116	0.174	0.268
4.2	Japanese	67	2.433	1.282	0.157	0.527
	International	41	3.512	1.381	0.216	0.393
4.3	Japanese	68	2.691	1.237	0.150	0.460
	International	41	3.122	1.100	0.172	0.352
4.4	Japanese	67	3.373	1.347	0.165	0.399
	International	41	3.366	1.199	0.187	0.356

Importance of Cultural Exchange

The fifth section focused on the importance of cultural exchange, with the dependent variables being responses to survey items 5.1-5.4. The results suggest that both groups valued cultural exchange and considered it beneficial for the experience of developing intercultural competence, with Japanese students perceiving only a slightly higher benefit than their international classmates.

Quantitative data shows strong agreement between groups. Almost identical mean scores were found for Item 5.1, "I believe that cultural exchange is essential for a meaningful language learning experience" ($p = 0.965$, Chohen's $d = 0.009$), and Item 5.2, "Learning about different cultures in integrated classes is equally important to language proficiency," ($p = 0.409$, Cohen's $d = 0.164$). (See Tables 9 and 10.) Responses remained consistent between groups for Item 5.3, "Cultural exchange positively influences my overall educational experience" ($p = 0.603$, Cohen's $d = 0.103$), and Item 5.4, "Cultural exchange is important for developing intercultural competence." However, there was a small but non-significant difference, with Japanese students reporting slightly stronger agreement ($p = 0.316$, Cohen's $d = 0.201$). (See Table 9.)

Table 9

Importance of Cultural Exchange – Independent Samples T-Test

Items	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
5.1	0.044	105	0.965	0.011	0.246	0.009	0.201
5.2	0.829	107	0.409	0.185	0.224	0.164	0.198
5.3	0.522	107	0.603	0.112	0.215	0.103	0.198

Table 9

Importance of Cultural Exchange – Independent Samples T-Test

Items	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
5.4	1.007	106	0.316	0.218	0.216	0.201	0.200

Table 10

Importance of Cultural Exchange – Group Descriptives

Items	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
5.1	Japanese	68	4.985	1.152	0.140	0.231
	International	39	4.974	1.347	0.216	0.271
5.2	Japanese	68	5.015	1.126	0.137	0.225
	International	41	4.829	1.138	0.178	0.236
5.3	Japanese	68	5.015	1.099	0.133	0.219
	International	41	4.902	1.068	0.167	0.218
5.4	Japanese	68	5.118	1.072	0.130	0.210
	International	40	4.900	1.105	0.175	0.225

The qualitative responses support these trends. For example, Participant E, an international student, expressed how integrated classes can help reduce bias and misconceptions:

> *It also can reduce some bias from the different cultures, and for me, I learned about foreign cultures just from the news or the internet, and some media might have some bias on the report and what they write about. And I think the news is not true for some different cultures, and in the mixed class, every student can show some of their culture and what they really know about their country with us. We can learn the true things from what they are talking about and can reduce some barriers from the news.*

Correspondingly, Participant B commented on improved knowledge:

> *Especially in most of the English classes, it taught me a lot of knowledge. I had no knowledge about the war and also Japan. I didn't get a chance in Japanese classes because they mostly share their culture in Japanese, and I didn't really understand everything. But in English classes, my Japanese friends often present their culture in English, and I've learned so much from that. Attending English classes has given me*

the chance to learn all these things. And even about the Hiroshima bomb.

While statistical results indicated no significant differences between groups, qualitative responses underscore how integrated classes help reduce cultural biases and give learners more opportunities for deeper cross-cultural learning.

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative data show that culturally integrated language classes present both benefits and difficulties, highlighting how Japanese and international students perceive and navigate their shared educational environments. Intercultural integration in language classes can enrich learning and provide opportunities for developing intercultural competence, but it also presents distinct challenges for both groups. Both recognize the value of varied perspectives and cultural exchange; however, the data suggests that international students recognize the benefits of integrated settings, particularly in terms of language and interpersonal skill development. Conversely, Japanese students sometimes struggle with English communication and group participation.

These results underscore the intricacies of intercultural discourse, where comfort and discomfort coexist. Although benefiting more from the integrated environment, international students experience more discomfort and challenges. Conversely, while Japanese students are generally comfortable in such settings, they sometimes deal with adapting to diverse learning styles and contributing equally. Such differences reflect the varied degrees of confidence and adjustment both groups require in integrated classes.

The findings also suggest several implications for educators and administrators. Recognizing the distinct challenges encountered in mixed groups is essential to improving support for students in culturally integrated language classes. These implications are further supported by the students' reflections, which emphasize personal growth and communication challenges in mixed classes. For example, lifting Japanese students' confidence in English communication and encouraging participation in group settings could enhance their learning experiences and outcomes. Simultaneously, helping international students feel more comfortable in the dominant culture can ease their discomfort in diverse environments. By addressing these specific needs, educators can create a more effective and inclusive learning experience.

Furthermore, this study aligns with Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence introduced in the literature review. As the model emphasizes, better cross-cultural engagement involves openness, reflective thinking, and adaptability, traits that surfaced in the study as critical in both the survey and interview responses. By incorporating intercultural reflection into coursework and embracing inclusive, culturally responsive practices, educators can help their learners have a smoother experience through their developmental process.

Ultimately, culturally integrated classes have the potential to enrich educational experiences by

fostering intercultural competence and providing diverse perspectives. While this study is specific to a Japanese university context, these implications can apply to a broader relevance for institutions in non-English-dominated settings experiencing transitions and internationalization. At the same time, careful attention to adjustment and the dynamics of student engagement is paramount. Acknowledging and addressing these differences can help all students benefit more from integrated language classes, especially if supported by strategies that account for cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical complexities.

Despite these insights, this study has some limitations that warrant consideration. First, although culturally integrated classes are not yet common in Japanese university English language class settings, the sample size was relatively small. Future studies could involve research from multiple schools to gain broader insights into culturally integrated language classes. Second, the reliance on self-reported data can result in the possibility of bias, as participants' feelings and perceptions can oscillate based on time and daily circumstances. Additionally, since this study was conducted within a single university, its findings may not be fully generalizable to other institutional contexts. Future research should consider replicability and test whether the findings in this study are applicable beyond their institutional containers. Third, an imbalance in sample sizes between Japanese and international students, with the latter comprising a smaller proportion of respondents. While independent samples t-tests are generally robust to unequal group sizes, this imbalance may have affected statistical power, potentially making it more difficult to detect significant differences. Future research could aim for a more balanced sample to enhance generalizability.

Conclusion

This study affirms that culturally integrated English language classes offer unique opportunities for learners to gain intercultural competence, language skills, and global perspectives. While international students reported more substantial gains in interpersonal and communication skills, Japanese students encountered more group participation and confidence challenges. These findings suggest that integration alone is not enough. There is a clear need to incorporate intercultural competencies into course objectives and to design curricula that intentionally support equitable group engagement. Culturally responsive pedagogy and teacher training are essential to support diverse learners effectively. Beyond Japan, the implications extend to any institution that seeks to move beyond symbolic diversity and foster truly inclusive classrooms. As higher education becomes increasingly internationalized, well-supported, culturally integrated language classes can serve as powerful environments for preparing students to collaborate across cultures and succeed in an interconnected world.

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