

## Teaching and Learning: Japanese and International Student Collaboration in the Classroom

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### Abstract

This practical report introduces three intercultural collaborative trial classes designed to integrate Japanese and international students in first-year EFL classes. Using a CLIL-informed approach, the classes promoted intercultural understanding through culturally grounded activities and small-group communication tasks. Reflection surveys from both Japanese and international participants revealed overall positive experiences, with international students expressing strong enjoyment and Japanese students highlighting both linguistic gains and communication challenges. Analysis indicates that interaction across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds fostered intercultural awareness while motivating Japanese learners to further develop their speaking skills. The findings support the value of collaborative, content-based activities for enhancing intercultural understanding.

**Keywords:** collaborative learning, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), intercultural understanding, intercultural communication

### 1. Introduction

While collaborative learning and intercultural communication programming are increasingly common at university settings in Japan, implementation of programs promoting these concepts is proving to be a challenging yet rewarding process. Multicultural collaborative learning provides students with opportunities to develop intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997), which is recognized as an essential outcome of higher education internationalization. Such experiences allow learners to cultivate attitudes of openness, respect, and curiosity toward cultural differences, as well as the skills to engage in meaningful interaction (Deardorff, 2006).

This report presents an overview of the trial classes of an intercultural collaborative learning course and summarizes participants' responses using a post-lesson survey. The lessons were implemented in a specific first-year English language curriculum as part of Okayama University's current task of integrating non-Japanese students with Japanese students in order to promote cultural understanding, language exchange, and community building on campus and in the community at large. Languages, cultures, and life experiences were shared, friendships were developed, and seeds were sown for intercultural community building on campus.

Noted intercultural communication researcher Milton J. Bennet (1998) posed the questions "How do people understand one another when they do not share a common cultural experience... How does communication contribute to creating a climate of respect, not just tolerance, for diversity?" Moreover, how do students who come from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds communicate effectively and work collaboratively in a classroom setting? Kitao and Kitao (1998) argue that intercultural communication and cultural dialogue seek "internationalism and humanism" to promote global understanding.

Increasingly in Japan, intercultural understanding and effective communication between diverse groups of students on campus have become a focal point. In this way, facilitating intercultural dialogue between students from diverse cultural backgrounds is vital towards building an inclusive campus community. According to the Council of Europe (2008), intercultural dialogue can be defined as a free and respectful discussion between those from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic environments on the basis of collective respect and veneration.

The Communicative English (Speaking & Listening) trial classes focused on content specifically related to intercultural collaboration and intercultural understanding. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach where a second language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language simultaneously (Coyle et al., 2010). In the context of the collaborative learning trial classes, the lessons embraced a CLIL-based methodology where both *content*—intercultural understanding—and *language learning*—English as a foreign language and Japanese as a foreign language—were emphasized.

Further, one of the principles of CLIL is "building intercultural knowledge and understanding, developing intercultural communication skills, learning about specific neighbouring

countries/regions and/or minority groups, and introducing the wider cultural context” (Rozas, 2009, as cited in Romanowski, 2018, p. 77). According to a report from the Commission of European Communities (2003), CLIL has provided opportunities to diverse groups of language learners, fostering self-confidence in students who have not performed well in standard language learning settings. The trial classes used interactive, collaborative activities with the goal of having students learn from and about each other.

Therefore, a multitude of pedagogies was employed while carrying out the trial classes. Collaborative learning, intercultural communication and understanding, and CLIL methods and practices allowed the instructors to successfully navigate the challenges of an intercultural, multilingual classroom setting.

In alignment with departmental directives regarding increased intercultural understanding amongst students on campus, the authors of this paper served as the classroom teachers involved in this project. The goals of this project included:

- Enlist and guide non-Japanese (international) students on campus to join general education English speaking/listening classes.
- Develop and encourage intercultural understanding between Japanese and international students in a classroom setting.
- Enable students from diverse backgrounds to collaborate on a mini-presentation project in a one-off classroom setting.
- Foster a sense of community on campus where Japanese and international students can learn about, and collaborate with each other.

This report first describes student recruitment and participation, then outlines the contents of the three trial classes, and finally presents the results, discussion, and reflections based on the post-lesson surveys.

## **2. Student Recruitment and Participation**

Students involved in this project included:

- First-year Japanese students from three selected Communicative English (Speaking & Listening) classes.
- International students from various departmental faculties, mainly graduate students, but also several undergraduate students from the Global Discovery Program (GDP) and the Exchange Program Okayama for studying abroad/visiting students (EPOK)

In early June, 2025, the International Education Support Division sent a recruitment email, along with a poster (see Appendix 1) prepared by the authors, to all 948 international students enrolled at Okayama University. As a result, 14 international students expressed their intention to participate in one of the classes. Subsequently, two preparatory meetings were held in mid-June with the participating international students and the two authors. International students expressed various goals and diverse motivations for taking part in the trial classes:

- The need to socialize with Japanese students and other international students
- The need to diversify their routine and take a brief respite from academic life
- Wanting to better understand Japanese culture
- Sharing their own culture and teaching about their home country
- Practicing authentic Japanese language

### 3. Trial Classes: Scheduling and Student Numbers

In order to successfully integrate Japanese and international students in the classroom, appropriate scheduling needed to take place. The precise scheduling of class dates and times became a challenge as international students from diverse faculties were to take place in the project. As a result, available international students were able to choose specific times and dates that accommodated their schedules while the Japanese students' regular scheduled courses would be used as the core courses for this project.

The trial classes were conducted three times in the first-year required English course, Communicative English (Speaking & Listening), under the theme of Intercultural Communication.

- **1st session:** June 26, 2025—Instructor: Alexis Pusina—25 Japanese and eight international students participated

Note: the 8 international students consisted of six graduate students from various faculties and two undergraduate students from the GDP. The Japanese students came from the faculties of health science-related majors.

- **2nd session:** June 30, 2025—Instructor: Alexis Pusina—27 Japanese and seven international students participated

Note: the 7 international students consisted of five graduate students from various faculties and two students from the EPOK program. The Japanese students came from the faculties of science majors.

- **3rd session:** July 3, 2025—Instructor: Junko Otoshi—28 Japanese and eight international students participated

Note: the 8 international students consisted of seven graduate students from various faculties and one undergraduate student from the GDP. The Japanese students came from the faculties of science majors.

#### 4. Classroom Practice

This section presents details of the trial classes as examples conducted by the authors of this report.

##### **Trial Class 1 (July 3 Class, Instructor: Otoshi)**

The participants were 28 Japanese students and 8 international students. Before the lesson, a survey was conducted to gather topic preferences from both groups. Based on the survey result, the instructor selected “Food Culture” as the theme of the trial class. Table 1 presents the details of the lesson held on July 3.

Table 1. Lesson Plan for Trial Class 1

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Details</b>
<b>Lesson Objectives</b>	<p>Students will introduce themselves and build intercultural connections.</p> <p>Students will learn about Japanese traditional sweets (kibidango) and cultural stories (Momotaro).</p> <p>Students will collaborate to design a culturally appealing new version of kibidango for a global audience.</p> <p>Students will practice presenting ideas in English and reflecting on group collaboration.</p>
<b>Step 1: Introduction</b>	Greet students and explain today’s goals: cultural exchange and creative collaboration.
<b>Step 2: Icebreaker –</b>	Students sit in groups and greet each other.

<b>Getting to Know Each Other</b>	<p>Introduce themselves: name in their own language, meaning of the name.</p> <p>Answer get-to-know question:                      “If you could travel to another country, where would you go?                      What food would you try first, and why?”</p>
<b>Step 3: Input – Food &amp; Story</b>	<p>Show slides about kibidango.</p> <p>Ask: “When was the last time you ate kibidango?”                      Narrate/discuss the Momotaro story (Peach Boy).                      Play the short Hi-Chew video to compare Japanese sweets with global branding.</p>
<b>Step 4: Group Discussion – Create a New Kibidango</b>	<p>Task: Each group designs a new kibidango product for international appeal.</p> <p>Brainstorm: flavor, packaging, target market, new name.</p> <p>Encourage intercultural and creative ideas (e.g., fusion flavors, anime-style package, cross-cultural marketing).</p>
<b>Step 5: Presentations</b>	<p>Each group presents its product idea to the class.</p> <p>Encourage visuals (draw packaging or describe vividly).</p> <p>After each presentation, brief Q&amp;A.</p>
<b>Step 6: Reflection &amp; Closing</b>	<p>Students write a short reflection:</p> <p>What did you learn today?</p> <p>What surprised you?</p> <p>How did your group work together?</p> <p>Collect survey responses</p> <p>End with a multilingual “thank you” slide.</p>

**Trial Classes 2 & 3 (June 26 and June 30 Classes, Instructor: Pusina)**

The participants in the June 26 class were 25 Japanese students and 8 international students. The participants in the June 30 class were 27 Japanese students and 7 international students. The same lesson was repeated with a few minor revisions. Before the trial classes and considering input from both Japanese and international students, culture/country sharing and learning, along with “get to know” activities using both English and Japanese languages was decided upon as the

content for the class. Pre-class, all students were asked to prepare a brief statement, or preferably mini-presentation (3-5 minutes) about their home country/culture. Table 2 presents the details of the lessons held on June 26 and June 30.

Table 2. Lesson Plan for Trial Classes 2 &amp; 3

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Details</b>
<b>Lesson Objectives</b>	<p>Students will share and learn about diverse cultures and countries.</p> <p>Students will develop intercultural understanding and campus community.</p> <p>Students will develop foreign language skills during interactive, communicative class activities.</p> <p>Students will practice presenting ideas in English and reflecting on culture learning.</p>
<b>Step 1: Introduction</b>	<p>Welcome and praise all students for their participation in today's class.</p> <p>Explain today's goals: cultural exchange, intercultural understanding, foreign language practice, mini-presentation skill development.</p>
<b>Step 2: Icebreaker – Getting to Know Each Other</b>	<p>Speedline activity: 30-20-90 seconds with a partner, then change/rotate to a new partner.</p> <p>Move quickly, speak clearly (in English or Japanese if needed).</p> <p>Round 1(30 seconds - 15 seconds each partner) What's your name? What is your hobby? Where are you from?</p> <p>Round 2 (20 seconds - 10 seconds each partner): What's something you want people to know about your country/culture?</p> <p>Round 3 (90 seconds - 45 seconds each partner): My name is _____. Now and in the future I'm worried about _____. Now and in the future I'm excited about _____. Plus, follow-up question/s.</p>
<b>Step 3: Small group discussion #1</b>	<p>4-5 students/small group (1 international student + 3-4 Japanese students).</p> <p>Question &amp; answer: What's something you want to know about other people's culture?</p> <p>Rotate students into new small groups.</p>

<p><b>Step 4: Small group discussion #2</b></p>	<p>4-5 students/small group (1 international student + 3-4 Japanese students).</p> <p>Mini-presentations/brief statements about home country/culture.</p> <p>Student choice of topic/themes related to local culture, national culture/customs/language, etc.</p> <p>Most students prepared 3-5 minute PowerPoint designs, and others read from a prepared script.</p> <p>Brief questions and answers in small groups.</p>
<p><b>Step 5: Reflection &amp; Closing</b></p>	<p>Whole class discussion, de-briefing.</p> <p>Students gave input on the class, good points and points to improve upon.</p> <p>What did you learn today?</p> <p>How can we improve for future classes?</p> <p>Conclude class with “thank you for your participation” and student networking.</p>

## 5. Reflection & Survey Results

Following the trial classes, the participants were asked to complete a brief reflection survey. This section reports student reflections (from both Japanese and international students) on each trial class.

### 5.1 Reflections on Trial Class 1

A total of 34 responses were collected, comprising 26 Japanese students and 8 international students. Table 3 below summarizes their responses to the trial class.

Table 3. Overall reactions to the trial class

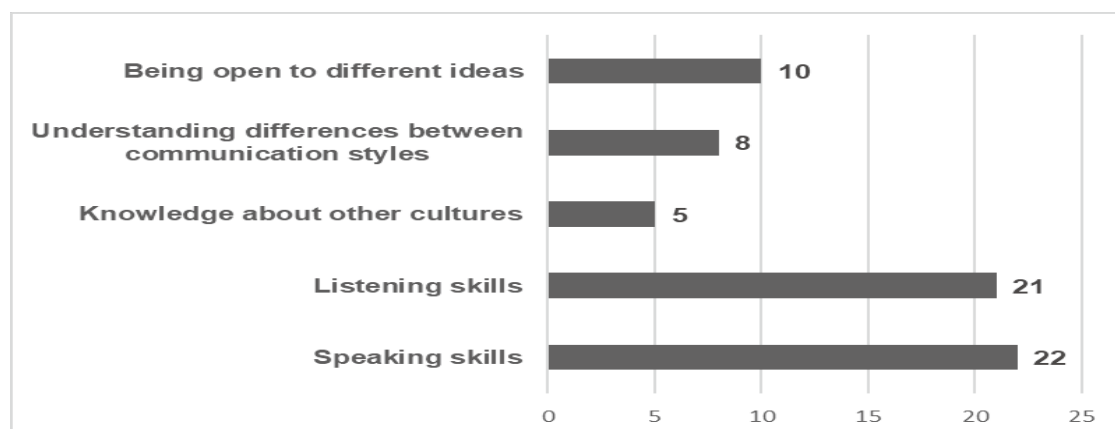
Questions	Japanese students (n=26)	International students (n=8)
I enjoyed the class very much.	18	8
I enjoyed the class to some extent.	5	0

I'm not sure how much I enjoyed the class.	3	0
I would absolutely attend the class again.	13	8
I want to take the class again if the topic interests me.	12	0
I'm not sure whether I want to attend the class again.	1	0

As shown in Table 3, all international students expressed very positive reflections on the trial class and a strong interest in attending the collaborative class again; however, some Japanese students displayed mixed attitudes toward their intercultural class experiences, despite overall positive impressions. Specifically, eight Japanese students selected either “I enjoyed the class to some extent” (n=5) or “I’m not sure how much I enjoyed the class” (n=3). These comments suggest that Japanese students experience anxiety about their oral language proficiency. It is understandable that those who feel uncertain about their intercultural class experiences are frustrated by the challenge of expressing themselves in English, even though they enjoy the intercultural interactions to some extent.

Additionally, Figure 1 shows the Japanese students’ views on the skills needed for effective intercultural communication after the trial class. Multiple responses were permitted.

Figure 1. Japanese students’ views on intercultural communication skills



The figure shows that Japanese students regarded speaking skills (n=22) and listening skills (n=21) as the most important elements of effective intercultural communication after the trial class. In comparison, fewer students mentioned openness to different ideas (n=10), understanding different communication styles (n=8), or knowledge about other cultures (n=5). This distribution suggests that students tended to prioritize linguistic proficiency over broader intercultural competencies such as flexibility, cultural knowledge, or communication strategies.

The open-ended comments further reinforce these findings. Many students noted that although they could often follow what was said, they struggled to express themselves in English, highlighting the need to expand vocabulary and improve fluency. For example, one wrote, “Although I could understand what was being said, there were many times I could not say what I wanted in English, so I want to be able to express myself.” Another echoed this frustration, stating, “I couldn’t say what I wanted even if I understood, so I thought I should increase my vocabulary to be able to speak.” Acknowledging this affective dimension offers deeper insight into how linguistic self-confidence influenced their responses to the intercultural learning experience.

## **5.2 Reflections on Trial Classes 2 & 3**

Many participants described the lessons as “enjoyable” and “a valuable experience,” reflecting a positive reception of the opportunities for intercultural exchange and communication. At the same time, challenges were identified, such as the varying levels of English proficiency and the need for strategies to sustain conversations (e.g., careful topic selection). It is anticipated that such feedback will be incorporated into the design of future programs to ensure greater accessibility and a more rewarding learning experience.

Japanese students’ comments reflected that both content (intercultural understanding) and language were developed during the trial classes. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is the use of English as a shared means of communication among speakers of different first languages, especially in intercultural contexts, where intelligibility matters more than native-speaker norms (Seidlhofer, 2011). For example, students expressed learning about “culture of other countries,” “foreign culture,” and “some foreign cultures.” Learning about specific cultures such as “In Indonesia, each island has its own unique culture and traditional clothing,” and “I learned about the working culture in Malaysia and the local specialties of Taiwan.” Another impactful comment

was "... it was my first time talking with someone from a foreign country and I enjoyed everything about it."

Japanese students enjoyed teaching about their own country and culture while learning about that of the international students. One student remarked that "It was fun to introduce my own culture. Because, I was able to learn about the culture and history of various countries." Another student expressed that "I enjoyed the international students presentation the most and I can learn other culture and their presentation skill is awesome. They helped me enjoy talking."

In regard to language learning, Japanese students expressed their enjoyment with the conversation as well as the need to further develop their ELF skills. For example, two students remarked that "I learned how important to speak clearly and it is vital to speak slowly. I want to speak English well," and "I learned that if my English is not perfect, I can tell what I want to tell. Gestures and simple words are so important."

This trial class gave Japanese students insight on their own language learning development, or lack thereof. It allowed Japanese students to gauge their own language level and motivate them to continue developing their ELF skills. One student expressed that "I enjoyed communicating with international students because I could speak English more fluently than I expected." Other students stated "It is important to speak actively," and "I realized the importance of making an effort to speak English actively."

At the same time, one international student expressed that the conversations and small group work with Japanese students challenged some of their pre-existing beliefs about Japanese culture: "... I think the whole activity was great fun! I learned some knowledge about Japanese culture... Actually I used to think it would be more awkward to interact with Japanese people in English, but obviously I was wrong... it was such a nice day for me!"

International students expressed their fulfillment and curiosity while taking part in the small group and one-on-one discussions. For example, one student stated that "It was a truly enjoyable experience. We had many interesting discussions that made me feel both excited and curious. I also felt happy and comfortable sharing my thoughts with everyone." Another student remarked that "I like that we got to have more in-depth conversations because it made the students think beyond the usual topics." Students in the trial class were able to bond over shared concerns and excitement about a future world: "When (the Japanese students) talked to me about their worries

and exciting things regarding the future, I found the process deeply impactful. It's subtle yet real to see how different people hold varying perspectives on the future..."

In summary, students developed intercultural understanding skills while developing and assessing their own ELF skills. As an example of this dual-focused approach to the trial class, one Japanese student expressed that "I enjoy talking foreign country students the most. They are really good at speaking and listening, so I'd like to be able to do in the future through the English class. Also, I could know foreign culture to talk with them..." Finally, one international student expressed that "... (small group conversation) helped us to get closer to each other and really improved our conversation skills."

## **6. Discussion**

Drawing on the results above, we discuss both the challenges and the positive outcomes identified from the three trial classes.

### **Challenges:**

The authors experienced various challenges while preparing for and implementing the trial classes. Recruitment and enlistment of international students is proving to be the main obstacle to intercultural collaborative learning on campus. Because of international students' diverse course schedules, pre-existing course and research obligations, campus locations, and off-campus responsibilities, coordination of such intercultural collaborative learning is extremely difficult. Specific problems included:

- Students came from different faculty departments which include a unique class schedule, thus making attendance for both the preparation meetings and actual trial classes difficult.
- Both graduate and undergraduate students took part in the trial classes. Generally, undergraduate students in the GDP and EPOK programs showed little interest and were more difficult to recruit.
- During the enlistment process, several students showed interest but could not take part in the trial classes because of scheduling conflicts.
- Effectively advertising the intercultural exchange so that as many international students as possible were exposed to the opportunity to take part in the trial lessons.

Students came from a variety of different faculties, both graduate and undergraduate. Each student in each faculty had course and/or research obligations that made their attendance at the preparation meetings and trial classes difficult.

Coordination of preparation meetings in order to gather as many international students as possible to effectively prepare for the trial classes: due to students' different schedules and different physical locations (Shikata vs. Tsushima campus), coordination of preparation meetings was difficult. Some graduate students came from the Shikata campus for the sole purpose of attending the trial classes; the physical location difference and time that it took to commute to the Tsushima campus was difficult for these students.

Communication with international students over email in order to ensure their attendance and follow through in their commitment to the project. Most of the students proved to be quite professional in their communications; however, a few were not; for example, neglecting to reply to emails and failing to show up for preparation meetings after confirming their attendance.

Lack of efficient, campus-wide communication networks that allow instructors and programs to reach out to the masses of international students. Because international students come from various departments and faculties, establishing effective communication with all international students proved to be difficult. Moreover, some populations of international students who are already involved in faculty-specific courses and who have those obligations may not be able to take part in intercultural understanding and learning opportunities on campus. Some populations of international students simply may not be exposed to intercultural exchange opportunities to build community on campus.

The mixed language levels of both Japanese and international students in the trial classes. In regards to ELF, while most Japanese students possessed similar CEFR (A2-B1) levels, some students have had more access to real-world speaking and listening in English and thus felt more comfortable using ELF with the international students. At the same time, international students used both ELF (their first languages included Bahasa Indonesia, Burmese, Chinese, Taiwanese, Moroccan, Arabic, and Malaysian) as well as Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) to communicate with Japanese students. Most of the international students seemed quite proficient using ELF although levels and comfortability expressing themselves in English varied to certain degrees. Some international students have had more exposure to Japanese and felt more

comfortable communicating, whereas other students found it quite challenging to communicate using JSL.

**Positive Outcomes:**

With the crucial assistance of the international education office, the teachers were able to successfully recruit a small number of international students. Without this assistance, the recruitment of international students would have proved to be futile at best. Effective communication and collaboration between various departments such as the General Education Department and the Global Education office is vital to future success in regards to intercultural collaborative learning at Okayama University.

During this intercultural and multilingual classroom experience, students were able to effectively communicate while taking part in classroom activities that encouraged the use of all languages to share, teach, and learn about culture, and develop friendships while building community on campus. While there were challenges of communicating hastily and effectively during classroom activities; overall, English was the dominant and most effectively used tool for communication and intercultural understanding, thus underpinning the fact that CEFR A2-B1 level Japanese students could actively and effectively participate in the trial class.

Effective collaborative learning that took place in the trial classes included intercultural, goal-oriented teamwork during student activities. For example, mixed groups of Japanese and international students were able to work together on a goal-oriented classroom task using mostly ELF, but also JFL in the process. For example, the kibidango activity in Trial Class 1 played a meaningful role in fostering intercultural understanding. The collaborative design task required students to draw on both cultural knowledge and creative thinking, prompting authentic exchanges about tastes, traditions, and everyday practices in Japan and abroad. The process of co-creating a culturally appealing “new kibidango” encouraged students to negotiate ideas, clarify meanings, and appreciate different perspectives. As a result, small group presentations demonstrated the effectiveness of the collaborative learning and intercultural communication activities. Real-world, immersive intercultural understanding took place in the trial classes. Both Japanese and international students experienced active cultural sharing and learning in the trial classes. For example, students gave short PowerPoint presentations about their local area cultures and customs, and home countries, using ELF as the main, interactional language.

English as a Second Language *and* Japanese as a Second Language skills were developed during the trial classes and preparation meetings. Japanese students were able to develop their ELF, intercultural understanding, and social awareness skills. The majority of international students, whose native language is other than English, were able to develop their ELF and JSL skills, intercultural understanding about Japanese and other diverse international cultures, and feel a sense of accomplishment through the sharing and teaching about their own cultural background.

International students developed valuable professional skills: appropriate online communication with professors, professional follow-up communication via emails, professional follow-through skills in terms of preparing trial class tasks and responsibilities such as preparing a PowerPoint presentation, attendance at preparation meetings, and attending and participating in the trial classes. Both Japanese and international students developed meaningful PowerPoint design skills and oral presentation/public speaking skills using a second language in small group classroom settings.

## **7. Conclusions & Implications**

This paper has reported on trial classes involving collaboration between Japanese and international students as part of a university-wide intercultural collaborative project. The trial classes provided empirical support for the value of CLIL-informed approaches and the development of intercultural communication skills. By engaging students in collaborative tasks grounded in meaningful cultural content, the classes operationalized CLIL principles that emphasize learning “through” language rather than merely “about” language.

We conclude by highlighting several issues for improving future classes. Inter-departmental communication networks should be improved upon in order to better serve both international and Japanese students on campus. Departmental faculties should be better at supporting international students by more effectively sharing resources, pooling resources, not repeating services for students, and efficiently communicating with the mass of international students.

Questions that must be considered when implementing future intercultural collaborative learning classes include:

- How best can the community of international students on campus be reached and communicated with? In other words, recruitment and enlistment of international students

to take part in intercultural collaborative learning on campus is a serious challenge; therefore, what are some effective solutions to this problem?

- In a classroom setting, how can the wide range of ELF and JSL abilities be accommodated so that all students can interact and communicate effectively on goal-oriented tasks?
- What is the best way to engage international students and expose them to opportunities related to intercultural exchange and building community on campus?
- What existing online, administrative, departmental networks currently in existence will allow international students to communicate efficiently in order to effectively share resources, opportunities, and networking webs?
- What physical and virtual, safe and comfortable spaces on and off campus allow Japanese and international students to co-exist, interact, and communicate with each other organically?
- How can Japanese and international students effectively immerse themselves into multicultural settings in order to experience the benefits of such interactive, intercultural engagement?

The most meaningful implication was the excitement that was experienced, and the enthusiasm that was shown, by students involved in the trial classes. Smiles and laughter were plentiful, language and culture were exchanged, and the seeds were sown for future community building on campus. New student friendships and networks were developed as a result of the trial classes. In this way, simple yet tangible communities were being built amongst diverse student groups on campus.

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## Appendix 1: A poster for recruiting international students

# Intercultural Connections

- Seeking international students for class visits in Term 2
- Practice Japanese コメントを追加 top valuable skills
- Give back: help build community on campus



- Scan the QR code on the right to access the form and sign up!
- Please submit your information ASAP or by June 10
- Questions? Contact Junko Otoshi (otoshi-j@okayama-u.ac.jp)

