

Reframing intercultural exchange through service-learning: A case of subtle English integration in Japan

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Abstract

English education can feel bittersweet for some Japanese college students. Although many aspire to speak English fluently, low confidence in their language abilities often discourages participation in global programs, particularly when English communication is presented as a central focus of the programs. This study reports the results of a small-scale exploratory study in which intercultural exchange was embedded more subtly within a service-learning program combined with an internship component, for the purpose of examining how students navigate the use of English and intercultural communication in a complex learning environment. Using pre- and post-program student surveys, the study applies content analysis to assess changes in expectations, perceived learning outcomes, and self-evaluated English confidence. The analysis reveals a shift in perceived learning outcomes. While students initially expected learning to come equally from intercultural exchange, internship tasks, and service-learning, post-program reflections show that intercultural communication became the central learning experience and was described as both the most challenging and the most rewarding aspect of the program. Students also reported a modest improvement in self-evaluated English confidence. In conclusion, the findings suggest that even when English is not foregrounded, strategically framed programs have a potential to produce meaningful intercultural exchange.

Keywords intercultural exchange, service-learning, Japan, English education

1. Introduction

The COVID pandemic was a devastating blow to international education. The health crisis shut down global mobility, and universities around the world rushed to offer virtual programs designed to mimic the study-abroad experience (Merola et al., 2023; Upson & Bergiel, 2023; Chang & Gomes, 2022; Gaitanidis, 2021). A large volume of research followed and identified the benefits and challenges of offering virtual study abroad programs. The existing research conducted in various countries so far seems to concur that while virtual programs can offer financially affordable and flexible learning opportunities for busy students, online studies cannot entirely replicate the experience that students earn through traditional study abroad (Hamada & Iwasaki, 2024; Allen and Ramonda, 2023; Dong & Ishige, 2022; Minotti, 2022; Mishra, 2022; Nakahashi, 2022; Santiso & Sanz, 2022; Matikainen & Cote, 2021; Kurita, 2021).

In post-COVID Japan, activities involving interaction with foreign students within the country, commonly known as intercultural exchange (IE), also regained

attention.¹ While not a new concept, IE programs have long played a role in promoting the internationalization of college environments as well as offering students opportunities to develop global competencies such as openness and cross-cultural understanding (Rosenbaum et al., 2025; Di Pietro, 2022; Katsumata, 2021; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Then came the pandemic, which reminded us of the importance of face-to-face interaction and sparked discussions about whether IE programs, along with virtual alternatives, could serve as substitutes for traditional study abroad experiences.

For example, Rosenbaum et al. (2025) recently surveyed over 600 undergraduate students at a national university in Japan and found that while students view both study abroad and IE programs at home as opportunities to learn foreign languages, they are more likely to turn to the latter when they have one or more concerns about studying abroad. At the same time, their empirical analysis indicates that IE may serve more effectively as a preparatory step for students intending to study abroad. Based on a survey of over 200 Japanese students at the same university, Iwaki and Tatsumi (2021) reported that while 75% viewed IE as a distinct experience

¹ More recently, the term “intercultural collaborative learning” (ICL) is often used to describe activities that involve interaction and collaboration among students with different cultural backgrounds in Japan. The ICL, however, can be integrated into traditional study

abroad or virtual programs while the term “intercultural exchange” has been used to explain activities involving face-to-face interactions with foreign students on campus or inside home countries (Tatsumi, 2025; Rosenbaum et al., 2024)

from studying abroad, most rated it positively, especially in contrast to virtual programs, which received less favorable evaluations. These findings suggest that although neither IE nor virtual programs can fully replace traditional study abroad, IE may be able to serve not only as a financially affordable alternative for language learning but also as a more attractive option than virtual programs for fostering meaningful interactions through face-to-face communication.

However, ensuring student participation continues to pose a challenge. This issue is well documented in the context of traditional study abroad, where a notable gap exists between students who express interest and those who commit to going abroad (Kim & Lawrence, 2021). While financial concerns remain the primary barrier, previous studies reveal that a lack of confidence in speaking foreign languages, namely English, also plays a significant role in discouraging Japanese students from learning abroad (Rosenbaum, 2024; Burden, 2020; Kojima et al., 2015). Some studies (e.g., Rosenbaum et al., 2024; 2025) further show that the same pattern holds for the case of IE programs. Students tend to be hesitant to participate in these domestic programs when they doubt their language abilities, even though such programs are designed to help them improve those very skills.

To address the challenge and promote broader participation in global learning at home, Rosenbaum (2024) reported the outcomes of a pilot program that framed an IE experience as an internship-like opportunity with companies in fields such as AI and tourism. The program also intentionally placed minimal emphasis on English usage in its promotional materials, so that it could appeal to a wider range of students, including those who might otherwise hesitate to join due to anxiety about using English. The findings suggest that while Japanese students were initially most attracted to the opportunity to work with companies, they ultimately found the experience of communicating in English to be the most rewarding and challenging. In other words, when the program shifted students' attention toward gaining work experience, they appeared more willing to participate even if they were not fully confident in their language abilities. Additionally, although the program involved a small group, it attracted more male participants than female. It was an interesting finding given the consistently higher rates of female participation in study abroad programs (Sponoseller, 2021).

This article presents the results of running a program in which intercultural exchange was embedded within a complex structure that combined service-learning and internship components, where students were tasked with a diverse set of missions. Service-learning is a form of active learning developed in the U.S., in which students learn through activities that address the needs of surrounding communities. Unlike general volunteer work, service-learning follows a structured process: understanding community issues and needs, working on-site to address them, and reflecting on the experience through discussions and presentations (Lau et al. 2021; Iwata, 2015; Kawata, 2014). Due to the wide range of benefits it can offer, such as the development of analytical, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills, as well as self-

efficacy, service-learning has become one of the most widely adopted active learning methods used at universities around the world (Lau et al., 2021; Afzal & Hussain, 2020; Clark et al., 2013; Celio et al., 2011; Astin et al., 2000). In this new program, an internship component was also integrated into the service-learning framework by having students work with an actual corporation's business plan that aimed to address community challenges.

The main purpose of this study is to examine how Japanese students navigated English usage throughout a complex program. Whereas Rosenbaum's previous research (2024) primarily explored how recruitment was influenced by the strategic de-emphasis of English in an internship-like program, this follow-up investigation places greater emphasis on analyzing how students managed and perceived the similarly downplayed role of English within a multifaceted learning environment that blended intercultural exchange with both community- and corporate-oriented tasks. The key finding is that, although English was not positioned as a formal learning goal, students nonetheless experienced it as the emotional centerpiece of the program. Taken together with the earlier work, this study highlights the importance of designing programs that create meaningful and immersive opportunities for cross-cultural communication while simultaneously reducing the psychological pressure often associated with language learning.

2. The Program Details

The program was conducted in April and May of 2025. It was offered to a total of 18 students who were enrolled in seminars on International Politics and International Development offered by the School of Global Studies at a Japanese university. Their partner school was a public university in Singapore. As a part of a study abroad course in Japan, 25 students from the university participated in this IE program.

The main theme of the service-learning program was the revitalization of Seto City, located 32.5 km from the Nagoya metropolitan area and facing population decline and aging demographics. In order to sustain its economy, the city, together with local residents and other stakeholders, has been seeking ways to attract young people to visit, and ideally to settle. A major player in these efforts has been a corporate group consisting of a travel agency and its parent railway company. Because the group owns several train stations in the city and facilitates tourism programs, the revitalization of Seto through inbound tourism and re-settlement is directly tied to its survival. The corporation has therefore been working with local residents, business owners, and forest managers to utilize both an underused forest and what used to be the main shopping street near one of its stations as focal points of revitalization efforts.

The objective of the student participants was not only to gain an understanding of the city's revitalization needs but also to complete a concrete task aligned with an ongoing corporate project: *“Design and present an educational program that utilizes the forest and shopping*

center located in Seto City and promotes the city's inbound tourism." Students were asked to develop ideas for educational programs that would appeal to young people and families with children, as this demographic has been a key focus of revitalization. Students were then expected to present their proposals to a panel of judges consisting of company employees and community stakeholders, who evaluated the ideas for feasibility and potential incorporation into future tourism packages. In other words, students' contributions to the community were assessed by how realistically their ideas could be transformed into implementable programs.

To complete the task, students from the Japanese university engaged in the program for a full two months. Their activities included learning about the company's mission and strategies for regional revitalization, conducting site visits to the forest and shopping district, and interviewing local residents, business owners, and

forest managers. A significant portion of the preparation period was devoted to background research and brainstorming potential educational program designs prior to the arrival of the students from Singapore. During this stage, students also participated in guided briefings and class discussions that encouraged reflection on community needs. Little explicit attention was given to English usage, since the program was intentionally designed to keep the focus on service-learning. Students from both institutions worked together during the final two weeks, conducting joint site visits and stakeholder interviews. In the final week, these groups developed and presented their proposals to the company and Seto stakeholders. Reflection activities were built into the program through both anonymous surveys and in-class discussions after the completion of all program activities. Figure 1 below illustrates the process of developing this program.

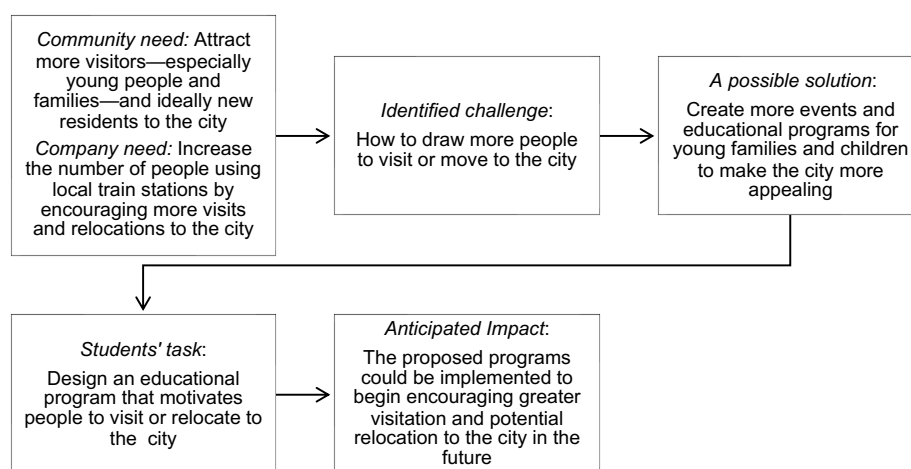


Figure 1. Process of developing a service-learning project

3. Research Design

In this section, we discuss the process of analyzing and comparing pre- and post-program anonymous surveys, which were voluntarily completed by 14 out of 18 students. The pre-program survey was administered immediately after the introductory session, during which students were briefed on the company's mission of regional revitalization and the specific tasks they were expected to complete. The post-program survey was conducted at the end of the program as part of the students' final reflection activities.

Based on these surveys, we conducted a content analysis of student responses, comparing their expectations before the program with their reflections afterward. Specifically, responses were categorized into three themes—intercultural exchange, internship, and service-learning—based on keyword frequency and thematic grouping. This approach helped illuminate how students' perceived areas of focus shifted or remained stable across different dimensions of the program, which blended cross-cultural collaboration, professional skill-building, and community engagement.

The *intercultural exchange* category included responses and keywords referencing communication with

foreign students, English language usage, cultural differences, or interpersonal interactions between Japanese and Singaporean students. Terms such as *English*, *Singapore*, *intercultural*, and *communication*, as well as comments about gaining insights through intercultural dialogue, were coded under this theme. The *internship* category captured content related to structured program development, business-oriented collaboration, and skills commonly associated with internships. Keywords like *planning*, *proposal*, *presentation*, and *teamwork*, along with reflections about proposing ideas to companies or using tools such as Canva for professional-style presentations, were assigned here. Finally, the *service-learning* category referred to experiences tied to community engagement, understanding local needs, and applying knowledge in real-world settings. Phrases related to *community*, *fieldwork*, *local issues*, or *hands-on experience* were included here, often highlighting activities in Seto City, interactions with residents, or learning from direct engagement with stakeholders.

Preliminary keyword frequency counts and visualizations such as word clouds, along with an initial listing of comments by category, were generated using Python scripts with support from ChatGPT. These automated outputs helped identify initial patterns, but all

coding and interpretation were manually reviewed and confirmed by the authors to ensure that the nuances of Japanese students' comments were well reflected in the categories. In other words, a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive coding was adopted: while initial categories were guided by the program's design objectives (intercultural exchange, internship, and service-learning), new patterns and sub-themes were added based on the data as needed.

We allowed multiple codes per response, as some student reflections touched on more than one domain. For example, in response to a question about anticipated learning, one student commented: "Developing the ability to manage a project within an organization through a unique experience—one that even internships may not offer—of generating innovative ideas with Singaporean students to meet the needs of [the company name] and Seto City." This comment, also listed in Table 2, was coded under *intercultural exchange* due to the mention of collaboration with Singaporean students, and also under *service-learning* for its emphasis on addressing local community needs. As a result, the total number of coded frequencies, presented in Table 1 and Figure 2, 4, and 5, sometimes exceeds the sample size.

We also acknowledge as a limitation that no independent intercoder reliability check was conducted, and other researchers might categorize certain terms differently in different contexts. Nevertheless, this descriptive analysis provides a useful starting point for understanding how students in this context navigated

learning, enjoyment, and challenges across intercultural, professional, and community-based elements. The main results are discussed in the next section.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Shift in Learning Emphasis

One of the main questions in the survey asked students what they expected to learn from the program and what they ultimately felt they learned the most. While initial expectations were evenly distributed across the three learning domains, students reported having gained the most from intercultural exchange experiences by the end of the program. Table 1 presents the raw counts and percentages of keyword and comment frequencies by category. In the table, a clear increase in the "intercultural exchange" category is observed, rising from 38.9% of students in the pre-program responses to 56.3% post-program. This suggests that intercultural exchange emerged as the most recognized learning outcome among participants. Figures 2 and 3 also illustrate these descriptive frequencies, showing how post-program reflections often highlighted communication, collaboration with peers from Singapore, and managing linguistic and cultural differences. Conversely, much fewer students identified service-learning activities as their main source of learning, while mentions of the internship component remained relatively stable.

Table 1. Frequency of Keywords in Students' Responses by Category

Category	Expected Learning (Pre)	Actual Learning (Post)	Anticipated Fun (Pre)	Most Enjoyed (Post)	Anticipated Challenge (Pre)	Most Challenging (Post)
Intercultural exchange	7 (38.9%)	9 (56.3%)	12 (70.6%)	9 (60.0%)	9 (50.0%)	9 (52.9%)
Internship	6 (33.3%)	6 (37.5%)	3 (17.6%)	4 (26.7%)	6 (33.3%)	6 (35.3%)
Service-learning	5 (27.8%)	1 (6.3%)	2 (11.8%)	2 (13.3%)	3 (16.7%)	2 (11.8%)

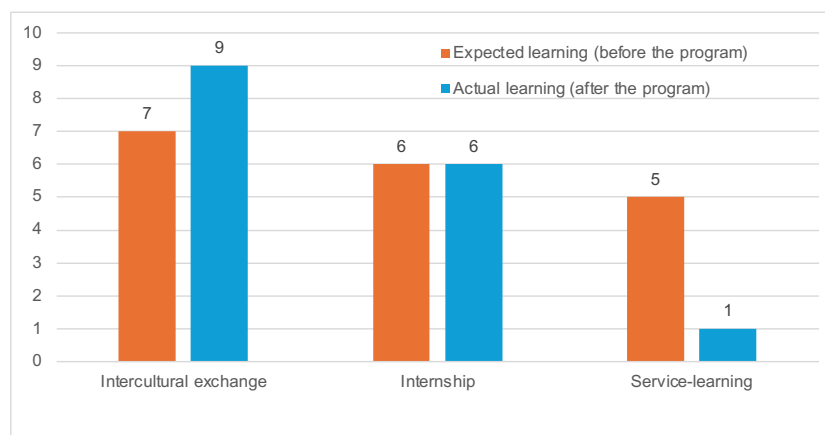


Figure 2. Frequency of Keywords in Student Comments regarding Expected and Actual Learning Outcomes by Category



Table 2. Students' Comments Before and After the Program

Pre-program survey What do you expect to learn the most?	Post-program survey What did you learn the most?
“Gaining perspectives different from what can be obtained through one’s own knowledge”	“Until I joined this program, I knew nothing about Seto City, but by visiting its forest and shopping streets and observing various things, I gained broader knowledge and was able to hear many ideas in the presentation that I would not have thought of on my own.”
“Knowledge in a specific field”	“Planning a project through exchanging ideas with Singaporean students whom we usually don’t interact with”
“Intercultural understanding”	“The most valuable learning was developing communication skills by working together with Singaporean students while being considerate of each other’s views.”
“Proposal-making skills”	“I learned a lot by seeing how students of the same age who receive high-level education abroad think.”
“Hearing ideas from students of other countries”	“The importance of expressing one’s own opinions”
“Ideas from the perspective of Singaporean students”	“The difficulty of planning using English”
“Understanding how well one can communicate and plan by working in groups to develop business ideas using the forest”	“I learned that using Canva for presentations is standard among Singaporean students. They said PowerPoint is boring.”
“Experiencing practical fieldwork outside the classroom that can’t be learned through regular lectures”	“I realized the importance of communication and the courage to express my own opinion. Singaporean students always spoke up and didn’t hold back like shy Japanese students. They clearly stated their opinions and communicated them well. I learned that, to be included in the group, you need to respond when asked, “What do you think?”—even if your answer might be wrong, expressing your opinion matters.”
“Gaining more specialized social experience different from ordinary part-time jobs”	“Through hands-on activities, I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges local people face and how to support them.”
“Thinking through a project in English and learning to use English for concrete activities”	“I was impressed by how actively Singapore students participated in discussions and felt I should learn from them.”
“Gaining new values and knowledge from Singaporean students”	“I found that the projects companies were working on were very complex, and that trying to solve every problem results in similar proposals.”
“Developing the ability to manage a project within an organization through a unique experience—one that even internships may not offer—of generating innovative ideas with Singaporean students to meet the needs of [the company name] and Seto City”	“I learned that business proposals must be developed while considering many different aspects. Just presenting what we want to do isn’t enough—it wouldn’t count as a real proposal. That was a major realization and learning point for me.”
“Presentation skills for making proposals to companies”	“Project ideas from the perspective of Singaporean students”
“Gaining an understanding of regional issues and needs through hands-on experience”	“Communication using English”

Note: These comments are listed randomly, and the comments on the left and right are not necessarily from the same individual.

4.2. The Most Rewarding Yet Challenging Experience

Aside from questions about learning, the survey also asked students what they were most excited about before the program and what they enjoyed the most afterward. As Figure 4 shows, intercultural exchange emerged as both the most anticipated and ultimately the most enjoyable component for most students, despite the fact that this program put little emphasis on English usage the entire

time. For activities related to internship and service-learning, both anticipation and enjoyment remained relatively low. Simultaneously, intercultural exchange not only ranked highest in anticipated difficulty but also emerged as the most challenging aspect of the program (see also Figure 5 and 6). This suggests that while students expected English communication to be difficult, the actual experience proved to be as challenging as anticipated.

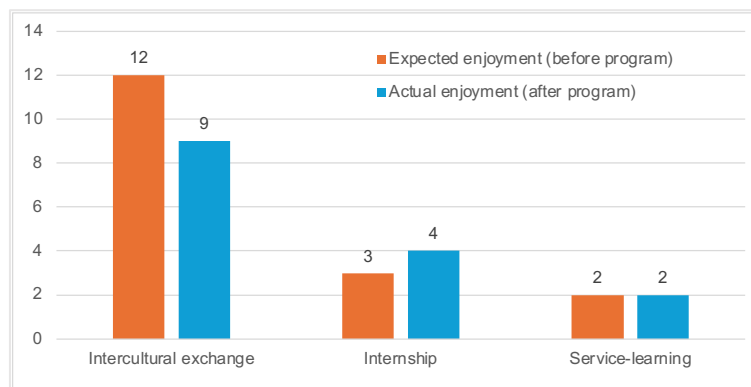


Figure 4. Frequency of Keywords in Student Comments regarding Expected and Actual Enjoyment by Category

Table 3. Students' Comments Before and After the Program

Pre-program survey What do you expect to be the most fun aspect?	Post-program survey What did you enjoy the most?
"Learning by taking action on your own"	"I found it very enjoyable and meaningful to work with my group members to think about how to promote Seto's forest and city, and how to attract more tourists and interest."
"Talking and creating together"	"Interaction with international students outside of school"
"Interaction with students from Singapore."	"Experiencing the process of launching a new program through service-learning and becoming friends with the students from Singapore"
"Exchange with students from Singapore"	"Exploring Seto's forest and shopping district"
"International exchange with students from Singapore"	"Exchange with students from Singapore"
"By engaging with students from Singapore, understanding differences in lifestyle and culture, and learning about different ways of thinking"	"Collaborating with Singaporean students on a single program"
"Being involved in programs carried out by [the name of the company], and possibly seeing our ideas become reality if they are innovative"	"Talking a lot and becoming good friends"
"Working together with students from overseas"	"Fieldwork outside the classroom was enjoyable. I was able to learn things that couldn't be understood in the classroom, and by actually hearing stories, I could better grasp the situation and imagine it more easily."
"Looking forward to seeing what ideas will emerge when planning a new project using the forest together with students from Singapore"	"The experience of working directly with local people to accomplish something together"
"I'm excited because it will be my first time working with people from overseas since studying abroad. I'll try my best to gain valuable experience"	"Experiencing "service-learning," which I had never done before, was extremely valuable. I was also happy to participate in a program related to "community development," which is an area of interest for me."
"Discussing ideas that can only be generated because we were raised in different cultures"	"Working together with Singapore students was personally very enjoyable."
"Talking with students from Singapore and contributing to the revitalization of Seto City"	"I believe I experienced cross-cultural exchange that you can't gain from lectures. Being able to have an exchange similar to studying abroad while staying in Japan was very enjoyable. "
"Thinking together with people who have lived in different cultural contexts"	"Being able to communicate with students from Singapore"
"Exchange of opinions"	"Exchange with students from overseas"

Note: These comments are listed randomly, and the comments on the left and right are not necessarily from the same individual.

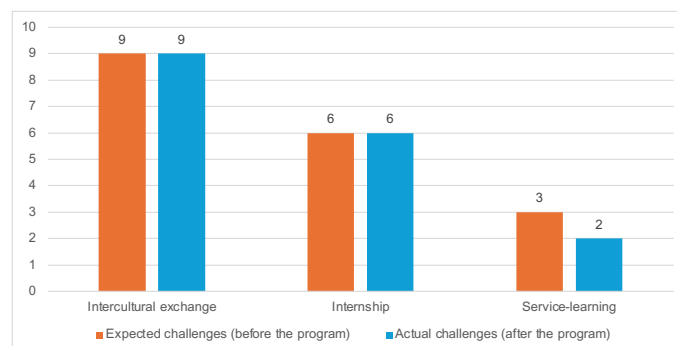


Figure 5. Frequency of Keywords in Student Comments regarding Anticipated and Actual Challenges by Category

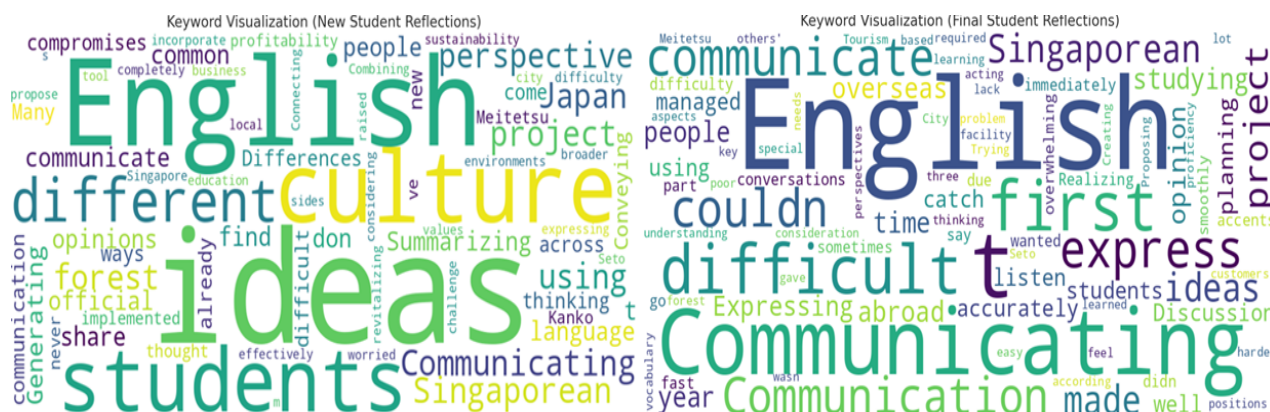


Figure 6. Visualization of Frequently Mentioned Words Before and After the Program

Table 4. Students' Comments Before and After the Program

Pre-program survey What do you expect to be the most challenging aspect?	Post-program survey What did you find to be the most challenging aspect?
"Summarizing opinions"	"Since I hadn't interacted with people from overseas since my study abroad in my first year, I found it difficult to adapt and respond flexibly during this intercultural exchange with Singaporean students. I realized that my English ability and adaptability were lacking."
"How to communicate with people who do not share the same official language"	"Accurately expressing my opinions in words"
"Generating ideas"	"It was difficult to communicate because I had trouble understanding English, but I still made an effort to express my thoughts without giving up and listened attentively to others."
"How to find common ground across different cultures"	"Communication in English"
"Communicating in English"	"Discussing project ideas using English"
"Communicating with Singaporean students; differences in culture and ways of thinking"	"Communicating with Singaporean students"
"Expressing what I want to propose in English"	"I struggled to express what I wanted to say right away, which made conversations with others less smooth. Also, listening comprehension was especially difficult due to accents."
"It's difficult to come up with ideas. The things I can think of are all ordinary, and likely things that [the name of the company] has already considered, so it's hard to come up with something innovative."	"The most difficult part was communicating with the Singaporean students. Their English was fast and hard to understand at times, and there were moments when I felt overwhelmed by how freely they acted. However, it's also true that some good ideas came out thanks to them."
"I've never had to think about things like profit or business sustainability in my life before, so I'm worried about whether I'll be able to think that far ahead."	"I realized how hard it is to see things from others' perspectives and take actions that match their needs."
"I realized that it's not just about using the forest, but we also have to think about how to revitalize the city of Seto—that's what makes it challenging."	"This program required us to approach the task from three perspectives—Seto City, [the name of the company], and the users—which made things challenging."
"Communicating with the Singaporean students. I might find it difficult to express my thoughts in English."	"One issue was our lack of consideration for various factors."
"Integrating the ideas brought by the Singaporean students with our own ideas effectively into the program"	"Communication in English provided valuable learning, but it was by no means easy. Especially when required to use words not typically used in daily conversation, I struggled with my limited English and keenly felt how lacking my skills were."
"Working together with Singaporean students—who were raised in completely different environments and cultures—to create a proposal that utilizes Japanese mountains, using English as a communication tool. It will be the most difficult part, but also something I'm looking forward to."	"Expressing what I want to say in English"
"Acting in a way that contributes to education while also respecting the values and ways of thinking of the local community"	"Creating a project proposal for an educational facility that utilizes the forest"

Note: These comments are listed randomly, and the comments on the left and right are not necessarily from the same individual.

4.3. A Lowered Hurdle to English Communication

Students' self-evaluations of their English language skills, collected before and after the program, indicate modest improvement (see also Figure 7). Most participants initially reported relatively low confidence, but many later expressed increased confidence following the program. This raises a question: while students found intercultural exchange to be both the most enjoyable and the most challenging aspect of the program, how might

this experience relate to their reported increase in linguistic confidence?

We argue that these findings represent two distinct strands of student thinking: a critical view of their own English proficiency and a separate attitude toward English communication itself, which is not necessarily tied to fluency. On one hand, many Japanese students were genuinely interested in using English, as they belong to the School of Global Studies, and enjoyed putting it into practice. As shown in Table 3, one student expressed

before the program: “I’m excited because it will be my first time working with people from overseas since studying abroad. I’ll try my best to gain valuable experience.” This comment shows that the student had been eager for an opportunity to use English since their last study abroad experience nearly two years prior. On the other hand, they lacked confidence in speaking fluently and, as anticipated, found English communication to be the most difficult part of the program. At the same time, their confidence grew

through a sense of accomplishment gained by completing the program while managing the most difficult aspect. Although few students directly mentioned this, both the tone and content of their responses to the open discussion question (see also Table 5), along with in-person observations of their behavior throughout the program, demonstrate that many students genuinely felt proud of their efforts and ‘surviving’ the program.

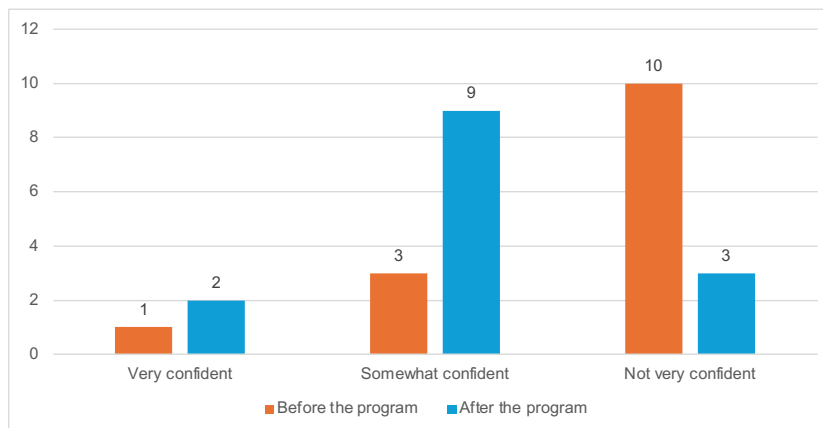


Figure 7. Pre- and Post-Program Self-Ratings of English Communication Skills

Table 5. Students’ Comments After the Program

“Lastly, please share your thoughts or suggestions”
“As a suggestion, I felt it would be better to allocate time for preparing presentation materials starting a few days before the presentation. That way, I think we could share various ideas and information more smoothly.”
“I really enjoyed the active, hands-on work.”
“Presenting jointly with a foreign university to a company helped me develop skills such as presentation, communication, and leadership—skills that will be useful in the real world. I was also happy that I became close enough with the Singaporean students to hang out in Nagoya during the weekend, even though the program was short.”
“I wish we had had more time to work on the slides.”
“Through this activity, having discussions with overseas students was a very valuable experience. During my study abroad, I only had everyday conversations, so I realized how difficult it is to engage in discussions and create something together on a single topic. These kinds of interactions with people from other countries are meaningful, and I hope I can continue to have more experiences like this.”
“Planning the project itself was really enjoyable, and I felt like it resembled the kind of work we might do after joining a company, so it was a great experience.”
“I want to do more activities like this. I want to engage with people from various countries and deepen my English and knowledge.”
“It was fun. I think these kinds of learning activities would make things even more enjoyable.”
“Through this service-learning experience, I realized the importance of engaging with the local community. There were many opportunities for practical learning, and it was a very meaningful time.”
“It was very difficult to exchange opinions in English. Increasing the sustainability of the project (such as profitability or whether it could run year-round) was also challenging.”
“Thank you for giving us the opportunity to interact with English speakers.”
“I hope this won’t be the only time—I want to participate in various activities.”
“It might be better to divide groups after the two seminar groups have had more time to build connections.”
“I really enjoyed it. It was especially interesting to not just sit in a classroom and listen but to actually go to places like the forest and take action while being creative.”

4.4. Overall Discussion of Findings

Overall, these findings highlight several important points. First, intercultural exchange functioned as the emotional and cognitive core of the program. Students consistently referred to it across their comments on perceived learning, enjoyment, and difficulty. Even though English communication was not positioned as a central learning objective by design, it nevertheless became the focal point of students’ reflections. This suggests that genuine interaction with peers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can create powerful learning moments, even when language use is deliberately deemphasized. It also shows that the most impactful

elements of experiential programs are not always those with the clearest structure or objectives, but those that push students to the edge of their comfort zones and require them to adapt in real time.

By contrast, internship-related learning remained closely aligned with students’ expectations, whether in terms of learning, enjoyment, or challenge. This may reflect the structured and concrete nature of internship-style tasks, such as planning proposals and managing program timelines, which were relatively straightforward to anticipate and execute. Students also had sufficient time to understand the company’s mission, values, and business plan, which helped them engage steadily with the internship component. For instance, Japanese students

visited the Seto community both independently and alongside the Singaporean students, building a foundation for developing feasible proposals.

Meanwhile, service-learning activities, intended to serve as the program's central framework, ranked lowest in student reflections on learning outcomes, enjoyment, and challenge. Notably, more students expected the service-learning component to be the most valuable and challenging part of the program at the outset, yet fewer actually rated it as such afterward. This suggests that the intercultural exchange component drew the strongest reactions, while service-learning was overshadowed and the internship aspect remained stable.

There are several possible explanations for the outcome. One is that intercultural communication, particularly in English, captured students' attention and energy more powerfully than service-learning. This is plausible, given that all participating students from Japan belonged to the School of Global Studies, where studying abroad in an English-speaking country for at least one semester is required. Many were already motivated to improve their English, and this motivation was reinforced through the process of collaborating and presenting with peers from Singapore. Put differently, the program became especially effective as a language-learning environment. The conditions that students described, in which tasks were difficult yet still achievable, resonate with classical theories of language learning such as Krashen's concept of comprehensible input and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Kobayashi et al., 2021; Shabani et al., 2010; Kavanagh, 2006). The program provided a setting in which students experienced English use as both demanding and manageable, a balance that fostered growth as well as confidence.

Simultaneously, service-learning may have lacked sufficient challenge, as Figure 5 also shows that very few students identified it as the most difficult aspect of the program. This may explain why it had less impact on students' perceptions, since prior research highlights the importance of depth and complexity in service-learning tasks for fostering meaningful learning (Ngai et al., 2018; Gallini & Moely, 2003). In particular, the assigned task in this program (designing educational programs to attract visitors to Seto) might not have fully conveyed the complexity of community revitalization and therefore resulted in limited challenge. Students were asked to develop program ideas but not to implement them. Had they been responsible for actually carrying out those programs, they might have faced more nuanced and realistic challenges, such as aligning their educational proposals with the needs and constraints of local communities. As prior research suggests, such depth and complexity are often necessary to generate meaningful learning in service-learning (Ngai et al., 2018; Gallini & Moely, 2003). As a result, in its current form, the program may have limited students' recognition of how their work could contribute to Seto's broader revitalization goals.

Even so, the prominence of intercultural exchange remains noteworthy, as this pattern closely aligns with findings from a previous program (Rosenbaum, 2024), which similarly examined how Japanese university students navigated English use in a collaborative

internship program with students from Singapore, even though English was deliberately downplayed in the program design. While the primary focus of the earlier study was on how program framing affected student recruitment, it also reported that students ultimately described English communication as both the most rewarding and the most challenging aspect of the experience, despite not initially identifying it as the program's main appeal.

These recurring patterns reinforce the argument that, even when English and intercultural exchange are not emphasized by design, they can nonetheless assume a central role in students' learning experiences. This highlights the value of incorporating real-world, socially embedded tasks that naturally prompt communication across cultural and linguistic lines, rather than placing language instruction at the forefront. The findings further suggest that students may be more open to language learning and intercultural engagement when these are treated as tools for achieving meaningful goals, rather than as explicit objectives. In this sense, strategically downplaying English can paradoxically create a stronger context for language use by easing pressure and allowing students to recognize their abilities while working toward shared outcomes.

5. Concluding Remarks

It has been such a challenge for instructors and Japanese universities as a whole to provide quality English education that leads to tangible outcomes, where students can confidently communicate and interact internationally in academic and professional contexts. Language-learning courses and traditional study-abroad opportunities are often effective and appealing to certain groups of students. Yet programs that emphasize English too explicitly may intimidate or discourage others, even if many students still wish to improve their skills. Against this backdrop, this paper examined a program in which intercultural exchange was embedded within the framework of service-learning. As discussed in the previous section, the results raised questions about whether the program was structured to produce strong service-learning outcomes in the strict sense. At the same time, the findings, in line with earlier work, suggest that integrating intercultural exchange in a subtle way into internship and service-learning activities may provide a productive pathway for developing students' global competencies.

There are several ways in which future service-learning programs involving intercultural exchange can be strengthened. First, program designers may consider expanding preparatory support for students entering intercultural settings, as the study highlights the ongoing challenges of communicating across language and cultural differences. Preparation could involve not only language readiness but also targeted development of soft skills such as negotiation, collaboration, and self-expression in diverse teams.

Second, it may be useful to provide more structured support for building students' confidence in English communication. Although participants described

meaningful learning, their self-assessed abilities remained modest. This indicates that exposure alone may not be sufficient. Reflective activities, individualized feedback, and gradual scaffolding may help students better recognize their progress and strengthen their sense of ability.

Third, the findings point to an opportunity to highlight the value of components beyond intercultural exchange. While students expressed strong appreciation for cross-cultural interaction, service-learning and internship tasks were mentioned less frequently in their reflections. Future programs could better integrate these aspects by clarifying measures of community impact and, where possible, creating follow-up opportunities that allow students to see how their proposals translate into practice. In fact, company stakeholders commented in the end that while the program served as a “good” introduction to community needs, tangible impact would require repetition or a longer duration.

Several limitations should also be noted. The sample size was small, with only 14 of 18 students completing both pre- and post-program surveys. This limits generalizability and raises the possibility that individual experiences disproportionately influenced the overall findings. For example, as previously mentioned, all participants were students in a School of Global Studies, and thus may already have had a relatively high level of interest in global themes and English communication, which could make the results less applicable to broader student populations. The study also relied on self-reported survey data, which capture students’ perceptions rather than objective outcomes. For instance, English confidence levels were entirely based on students’ own evaluations. What one student labeled as “low confidence” may have very different meanings depending on their background, prior experience, or cultural context.

The content analysis could also be improved by incorporating an independent intercoder reliability check into the process. A more robust mixed-methods design that includes third-party evaluations and objective language assessments would further strengthen the validity of future findings. Another straightforward yet important improvement would be to increase the sample size by involving more students in the same or similar programs. This would enhance both the objectivity of the analysis and the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, future studies with larger samples may benefit from sharing full codebooks in supplementary materials or open repositories to enhance transparency.

Finally, the two-month duration of the program may not have been sufficient to capture long-term effects, especially with respect to language confidence, community impact, or sustained interest in global learning. Follow-up research could adopt a longitudinal design to track whether the gains observed here persist in subsequent study-abroad experiences or international internships. Comparative research across institutions and disciplines could also provide insight into how students with different academic and linguistic backgrounds respond to similar program models.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that

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Ethical Approval

The study was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of Chukyo University, which waived the need for formal ethical approval due to the nature of the study. All procedures were carried out in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines and relevant regulations.

Data Availability

The data used in this paper is available upon reasonable request.

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