

Potential of virtual reciprocal exchange: Japanese students' self-awareness about their first language and culture

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Abstract

This study reports on an intercultural communication course that discusses self-awareness among Japanese university students about their first language and culture and examines relevant knowledge and self-awareness as key components of intercultural communicative competence. The course enables virtual exchange through a reciprocal monolingual partnership with American learners of Japanese as a second language. A review of literature on virtual exchange and intercultural communicative competence helped the author explain the course's objectives and design. The study's findings were derived from the course enrollees' reflective comments and coursework. These indicated that virtual exchange with learners of Japanese as a second language is essential in raising first language and cultural awareness for intercultural communicative competence.

1. Introduction

The quest for fostering global competency in the 21st century emphasizes the internationalization of higher education (IoHE). Knight (2004, 2008) presented the two pillars of IoHE strategies: internationalization at home (IaH) and internationalization abroad. The former is a broad concept. It was defined by Beelen and Jones (2015) as “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments (p. 69).” True to this definition, efforts toward IaH have been realized in various forms domestically. Including intercultural collaborative learning (ICL) courses in the curriculum is one typical example in Japanese universities (Suematsu, Akiba, and Yonezawa, 2019). ICL is an educational environment designed for intercultural contact and collaboration enabled by inbound student mobility to Japan. The recent decline in such mobility was affected by the pandemic-caused restrictions but drove the shift toward virtual spaces to realize such

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intercultural contact. The shift was also accelerated by the recent advancement and spread of cost-effective technology that enables virtuality and unplugs physical distance. Even after physical mobility resumes and becomes mainstream, virtual spaces may remain as a potent option for adding “international and intercultural dimensions” to domestic courses and curricula. Along this line, Leask and Green (2020) argued for “a rich opportunity for global learning at home” for all students and emphasized the concept of “a pedagogy of encounter” that does not rely on mobility.

While the landscape in IoHE has rapidly and radically been changing, the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has always been a prime interest for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in language education. Furthermore, Boye and Byram (2017) discussed how language and cultural awareness are interrelated and connected to ICC. Awareness involves explicit knowledge, conscious perception, attention, sensitivity, analysis, and reflection that can be included in language teaching and learning schemes (Byram, 2012). This study focuses on the importance of awareness, particularly of one’s own language and culture, to understand others. For this, it considers virtual exchange (VE) activities as a potential trigger for raising such awareness through the implementation of an intercultural communication-themed course at a Japanese university.

Section 2 is the review of relevant VE and ICC literature. Section 3 presents the two survey results that led us to the choice of reciprocal VE activities that we employ to raise Japanese students’ first language (L1) and cultural (C1) awareness. Section 4 explains the course objectives, structure, and design. Section 5 presents the findings derived from observing the coursework and students’ reflections. Finally, Section 6 provides the conclusion and mentions the study’s implications and future scope of study.

2. Literature review

This section reviews two critical strands of research relevant to this study, namely virtual exchange and intercultural communicative competence.

2.1 Reciprocal virtual exchange

Virtual exchange (VE) has been of prime interest to international education and language education stakeholders, particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. O’Dowd (2021) defined VE as “the engagement of groups of learners in online intercul-

tural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of coursework and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators.” In intercultural interaction and collaboration, mutual benefit is crucial to success, as in any other partnership, and participants are naturally expected to benefit from any collaborative activities. Therefore, any VE activities and events should be meticulously planned and designed to maximize two-way benefits.

VE initiatives and approaches can be categorized into three types: practitioner-led (or specific subject), institutionally led (or syllabus-shared), and outsourced (service-provider), as summarized in O’Dowd (2017, 2018). Of particular interest to this study is the practitioner-led type. This practitioner-driven subject-specific approach has been “developed by teachers who believe passionately in the underlying principles and aims of Virtual Exchange (O’Dowd, 2017: 21).” It aims to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and is often bilingual. E-tandem, for instance, manifests its reciprocity with partnerships between the two involved students. They assist each other in one’s second language (L2) learning through the other’s first language (L1) proficiency by regularly interacting via electronic media, such as e-mail, social network services (SNS), and video conferencing platforms. In the context of Japan and the United States (US), a typical instance of this exchange type is Japanese L2 learners in the US being paired with students in Japan who wish to learn English as L2 while helping their language partners with their L1, Japanese (Akiyama, 2015, 2017).

This study explores a different type of reciprocity for linguacultural partnership and collaboration. It reports on the principles and practices of an intercultural communication seminar course for second-year students at a Japanese university. The report focuses on the reciprocal nature of monolingual VE activities between universities in Japan and the US integrated into the course syllabus that centers around Japanese language interaction.

2.2 L1 and C1 in ICC

With an ever-growing diversity in the language landscape worldwide, the importance of “intercultural (communicative) competence (IC/ICC)” has been universally acknowledged. Different definitions, purposes, and uses are shaped around IC/ICC¹. The general defini-

1 There is a distinction between IC and ICC, with a particular focus on foreign language learning/use for the latter (Byram, 1997). Hereafter, ICC will be used throughout this manuscript due to its prime interest of this study.

tion agreed upon through an extensive Delphi study with a panel of intercultural scholars is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2004: 184, 2006: 247–248).” Similarly, as the result of an extensive review of intercultural literature, Fantini (2007) defined the concept succinctly as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself.” Among the significant ICC models, Byram (1997) focused on attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness as the five components necessary to become an interculturally competent speaker of a foreign language.

The importance of developing ICC is also mentioned in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), which the Council of Europe put together in 2001 as a guideline to describe the achievements of foreign language learners. The CEFR is known for its conceptual base of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. In its companion volumes (Council of Europe, 2018, 2020), the scale for pluricultural competence was newly added, with 23 can-do descriptors. However, the CEFR suggests consulting the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA) for detailed information. The FREPA contains hundreds of structured descriptors under the labels of knowledge (15 subcategories), attitudes (19 subcategories), and skills (7 subcategories).

Out of that substantial set, Matsumoto (2013) selected a limited number of statements that should and can be incorporated into Japan’s foreign language education context. The tentative list encapsulated and tailored for Japanese university students aimed to be “a framework, instructional models and evaluation tools (Matsumoto 2013:1)” and underwent several modifications and adjustments based on student and teacher survey and interview results. The resulting 29-item can-do statements were provided in Japanese, which we found manageable and valid as a self-assessment tool for the intercultural understanding component of our departmental curriculum. The survey utilizing Matsumoto’s list will be discussed later.

3. Background

This section presents the two survey results that initially motivated us to launch the

pedagogical practice described in this study.

3.1 L1/C1 awareness

As suggested by Byram (1997), among others, self-awareness and knowledge of the first language (L1) and culture (C1) are essential components of ICC. Knowing your own language and culture is a fundamental first step to understanding others and their differences. Interacting in one’s L1 with other L2 speakers helps develop both L1 and C1 awareness.

The FREPA-based 29-item ICC survey (taken from Matsumoto, 2013) was conducted, with the students’ consent, in the Faculty of Global and Community Studies² from 2018 to 2021³. Among the data collected during the four-year project, this study addresses the results from the 193 first-year students of the Department of Global Politics (student quotas: 75) in the three academic years of 2019, 2020, and 2021. Table 1 summarizes the survey statistics.

The response rate was approximately 80%. The survey was carried out in April 2019 and 2021, immediately after the new students started their studies. In 2020, the survey had to be postponed to July due to the confusion that stemmed from the COVID-19 outbreak. However, the one-way ANOVA result showed no statistically significant difference among the three-year groups ($F(2, 190) = 0.94, p = 0.39$); hence the data were treated as one set of post-admission freshman data.

The average scores on a 7-point Likert scale (from 7: “strongly agree” to 1: “strongly disagree”) for the 29 survey questions ranged from 6.17 to 4.21, with a mean score of 5.28. We did not present the list of the 29 survey statements here because that is not the main

Table 1: Survey Statistics

Academic Year	<i>n</i>	Average Score	Survey Period
2019	65	5.19	April 2019
2020	60	5.37	July 2020
2021	68	5.28	April 2021
TOTAL	193	5.28	–

2 The faculty has two departments: Department of Global Politics and Department of Regional Administration. The former emphasizes more on global competency in its curriculum.

3 The interim survey reports can be found in Takei, Yatabe, Sado, and Sumida (2021) as well as Takei (2022).

focus of this study. We did highlight several statements relevant to the following discussion.

According to this result, the students know about linguistic diversity and multilingual/multicultural situations, ranking this first (6.17 points). They also know that misunderstandings may occur because the same behaviors can be interpreted differently depending on the culture, which ranks second (6.01). However, ranking low as the 26th (4.73) out of the 29 items was the skills in objectively explaining one’s own language and culture and expressing opinions and views on other cultures. The attitude to critically view and discuss one’s own and other cultures also ranked low in 19th place (5.02). The low points were compatible with students’ comments, which were frequently expressed after intercultural exchange events. They felt disappointed and regretful about their inability to answer well when asked about the Japanese language and culture and about their own opinions.

3.2 Language choice for intercultural exchange

As in many other countries, learning English as a foreign language is an assumed requirement in Japan’s middle schools and higher education. Teachers and students recognize the importance of communicative skills in English in this globalized society. Both teachers and students tend to instantly associate “international” or “intercultural” exchange with English. There is also a growing research interest in English as a lingua franca (ELF). It is undeniable that English is a valuable means of communicating with people worldwide. As ELF is defined as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice and often the only option (Seidlhofer, 2011: 7),” there are numerous situations, particularly in academia and business, where ELF is functional and operational.

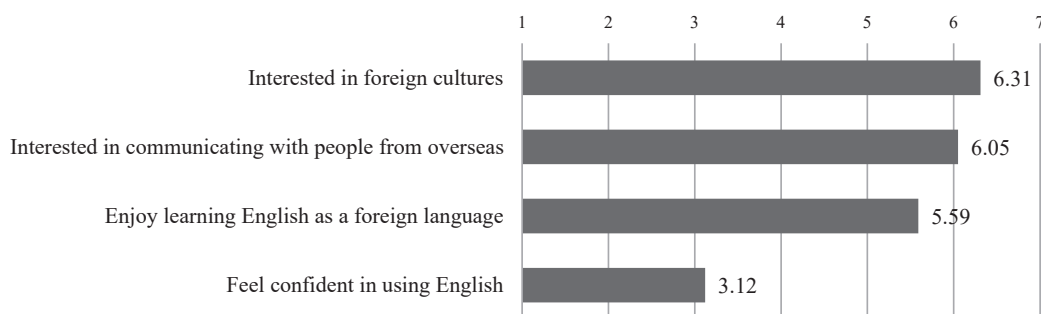


Figure 1: Preliminary survey result

Nonetheless, Japan ranks 78th out of 112 countries and regions listed in EF EPI 2021⁴, after South Korea (37th) and China (49th), and among other “expanding circle” (Kachru, 1982) areas in East Asia. The survey results at the author’s university in 2019, 2020, and 2021 also indicated a lack of confidence among Japanese first-year students about their use of English, as shown in Figure 1. The figures represent the average scores on a 7-point Likert scale (from 7: “strongly agree” to 1: “strongly disagree”) for the four preliminary questions asked to the 193 students who participated in the aforementioned ICC survey.

Evidently, the students were highly interested in foreign cultures (6.31 out of 7.00) and communication with overseas people (6.05) and enjoyed learning English (5.59). However, they did not feel confident or comfortable using English (3.12). Unfortunately, English can be a stumbling block in promoting intercultural exchange, as is often claimed in the context of Japanese universities. Some students hesitate to sign up for and join “English” events due to their lack of confidence and/or shyness.

4. Course overview

This section outlines an intercultural communication seminar course that the author has been conducting since 2019 with second-year students in the Faculty of Global and Community Studies. Driven by the two issues revealed by the survey results in the previous section, the course was designed to provide a less stressful context for intercultural experiences and facilitate raising awareness about language and culture. In it, virtual interaction in L1 Japanese plays an important role.

The primary goal of this 15-week course is to theoretically and empirically discuss self-awareness and knowledge of L1 and C1 as essential ICC components. For this, the course is structured to contain the following baseline components:

- A. Lectures in the Japanese language and Japanese conversation
- B. An opportunity to interact in a group of L1 speakers in an assigned discussion task setting and video-recording, transcribing, and linguistically analyzing the L1 interaction

4 EF English Proficiency Index 2021 Edition <https://www.ef.com/assetscdn/WIBIwq6RdJvcD9bc8RMd/cefcom-epi-site/reports/2021/ef-epi-2021-english.pdf> (accessed on September 20, 2022).

C. Discussion of the analysis results in class

D. Final slide presentation by students about their work and submitting a mini-research paper

Table 2: Course description

Academic Year	Enrollment	Course Format	Course Components	Intercultural Contact
2019	16	Fully in person	A, (B), C, D	None
2020	18	Mostly online	A, (B), C, D	Guest speakers from the US
2021	14	Partially online	A, B, C, D	Two VE sessions
2022	15	Fully in person	A, B, C, D	Two VE sessions

Since the course started in 2019, several configurations have been made to enhance the course contents, as summarized in Table 2. The course format was also affected by the pandemic. In 2019 and 2020, component B was realized by voluntary participation; therefore, a limited number of students had an opportunity to engage in L1 group conversation sessions, which all the course registrants were assigned to analyze linguistically. In 2021 and 2022 (ongoing), all the registered students were grouped into conversation sessions to help them explore their own L1 interactions.

The 2019 course did not include any intercultural contact segments. In 2020, when the classes were conducted online, two student guest speakers from a university in the US were invited to the class to present their award-winning speeches in L2 Japanese. It was made possible, coincidentally, via a personal connection. This addition was further elaborated in the two pre-planned VE sessions incorporated into the 2021 and 2022 course syllabi. In these sessions, the students had opportunities for monolingual synchronous interactions on Zoom with L2 learners of Japanese from the US. They discussed, in groups, using Zoom's breakout rooms on the given topics. These activities were designed to serve as an intercultural contact experience for Japanese L1 students, leading them to an objective and critical analysis of their L1 interaction data and deep insights into cultural values hidden within their language behaviors during the course discussion and assignment.

For further discussion, we will use the 2021 practice at a pandemic-driven milestone that directed attention to VE to highlight the effect of VE in developing ICC. In the Spring semester of 2021, 6 US university students virtually visited our classroom twice and

participated in a group discussion on Zoom with 14 Japanese students. For the US students, this was voluntary participation outside of their formal curriculum. The time difference was manageable because these students did not mind attending Zoom classrooms at night. The discussion topic of the first exchange was “What is difficult about learning Japanese?” Each group was asked to summarize their discussion results on Google Jamboard, a digital interactive whiteboard, and present it to the whole class later. Some groups explained that Japanese writing systems (*kana* and *kanji*), honorifics, and onomatopoeia were challenging. In the second exchange, the participants worked together in making sentences using onomatopoeia in Japanese. Onomatopoeia is the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named, such as *poripori*, *gatagata*, and *sarasara*, which is often used in Japanese conversations and is intuitively understood by L1 speakers but hard to learn for L2 learners. They also talked about the pandemic-affected student life. After each exchange event, the students were requested to submit reflection comments on their experiences, as in other weekly assignments.

5. Findings

This section presents findings derived from observations of the coursework and students’ reactions. These can be viewed as potential benefits for L1 Japanese speakers.

5.1 Students’ reaction

According to their submitted comments, the Japanese students found the exchange meaningful and beneficial because they learned about the difficulties that L2 speakers experience in learning the language. Some difficulties, such as *kanji* and honorifics, were understandable because L1 speakers also experienced the same challenges in their L1 learning experience. There were also unexpected difficulties for L2 learners, such as counting systems (different counters are used for people, animals, and objects in Japanese) and onomatopoeia, which they unconsciously acquire without remembering how they have learned. Apart from the topic content, overall, they enjoyed interacting with L2 learners of Japanese as their intercultural experience. Yet, they struggled to make themselves understood in simple Japanese and answer the questions from L2 learners with valid explanations.

5.2 Japanese interaction data analysis

After these virtual exchanges, the L1 Japanese interaction data were collected from five groups of three or four conversation participants, who signed the informed consent form for the use of data in coursework and future research⁵. Each session was about 15 minutes long. The recorded audio data were transcribed verbatim and provided to the students for independent discourse analysis work. Guided by the Japanese spoken discourse and interaction lectures, they chose their points of interest for the analysis of their final assignment. The linguistic topics they selected included the following:

- (1) reactive tokens (or *aizuchi*), a short utterance like *un*, *unun*, *aa*, *ee*, or *hai* produced by listeners during the other interlocutor's speakership;
- (2) fillers (or filled pauses), the sound, such as *ee*, *etto*, *ano*, produced during a spontaneous speech, that represents a pause filled by a vocalization;
- (3) speech style choice/shift (casual versus polite), two verb-ending forms indicating the degree of formality and relationship or social distance between interlocutors;
- (4) co-construction, the creation or completion of an utterance by two or more interlocutors in conversation.

These are all typical characteristics often observed in the Japanese spoken discourse which L1 speakers unconsciously perform and perceive as natural in conversation. We use reactive tokens as an example to further discuss students' reactions.

By analyzing their own conversation data, the students were amazed at the frequency and variety of reactive tokens they used. They also found that frequency and types of reactive tokens vary individually and depend on their roles in that interaction and the context (with or without teacher presence, for example). As one quantitative data, the Figure 2 graph below shows the number of utterances and reactive tokens of each conversation participant, namely students A, B, C, and D, in one sample group. As evident, students B and C were active speakers in this group. At the same time, D was an active listener, frequently using reactive tokens, and student A was a relatively quiet participant. Different types of group dynamics were also represented by the utterance/*aizuchi* distribution.

5 The human subject research project plan, including this L1 data subproject, had previously been reviewed and approved by the institutional review board (Approval #:2020-0010).

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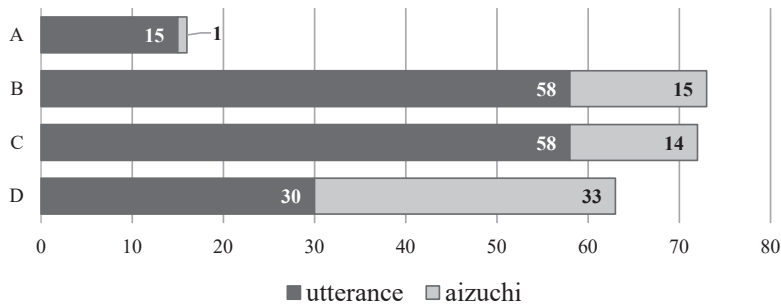


Figure 2: Utterance/*aizuchi* occurrences in conversations

5.3 Class discussion and presentation

After some quantitative data were shared, the students had a class discussion. A reactive token (or *aizuchi*) is a short utterance produced by listeners when the other participant speaks. L1 speakers did not feel interrupted but were rather comfortable about being heard with explicit verbal cues for listening and understanding. They regarded this behavior as quite natural. They also watched a well-circulated YouTube video in which *aizuchi* is humorously described by a YouTuber from North America as “annoying.” L1 students learned that *aizuchi* could be a problem in some cultures. Some students shared the anxiety or discomfort they felt during the earlier virtual exchange with students from the US. They claimed that some American students remained silent while listening until the end without showing any verbal reactions. That behavior made Japanese students feel worried and uneasy, and they wondered if they were listening, understood what was being said, or were interested. Such emotional reactions are often found in students’ reflective comments after (virtual) intercultural exchanges.

Student class discussions showed that they successfully connected the L1 interaction data analysis with their own VE experience. They figured out the cause of their anxiety in an intercultural communication setting by objectively analyzing their L1 interaction and their contact experience with American L2 learners of Japanese. The VE played an important role as a trigger to become aware of the differences between their L1 and other language behaviors. In the course-end presentation, one student focused on the importance of reactive tokens in Japanese conversation and attempted to compare reactions to the presence and absence of *aizuchi* by Japanese L1 speakers and other language speakers. Another student investigated the underlying C1 of such behaviors in the individualism/collectivism framework.

Speaking the first language is essentially an unconscious behavior. We tend to be unaware of the communication styles we employ and how we behave, respond, react, or interpret while interacting, unless we intend to objectively observe and critically analyze our language behaviors and cultural values hidden within such behaviors through intercultural experiences. Therefore, consciousness-raising is a crucial asset of the course. VE served as a vehicle that connects the dots between explicit knowledge provided by the course lectures and conscious perception and sensitivity toward language use gained through intercultural experiences.

6. Conclusions and future scope of study

This study explored a type of reciprocity for language-learning partnership and collaboration through a course at a Japanese university. In this course, the Japanese L1 speakers in Japan and L2 learners of Japanese in the US interacted in Japanese as a lingua franca (JLF) within a VE environment. It entailed a monolingual exchange, unlike an e-tandem activity, which is bilingual.

In this reciprocal monolingual partnership, L2 learners of Japanese in the US had opportunities to use the target language they learned in the classroom by interacting with L1 speakers in authentic communication settings. That is a significant benefit for US students, and such opportunities are vital, particularly in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic period, when very few international students from Japan are on campus. The post-event questionnaire revealed that the L2 participants found the exchange to be an enjoyable learning experience with authentic input and direct contact with the target language.

Meanwhile, the Japanese L1 speakers did not use or practice their target language (English) with the American students; they conversed in their first language. They experienced intercultural contact in a less stressful situation with their L1 Japanese, free from anxiety or fear of using L2. Still, they struggled to make themselves understood in simple and plain Japanese and experienced differences, unnaturalness, and awkwardness in interacting with the L2 learners. The findings derived from the students' reflective comments and class discussions suggest the potential of VE interaction with L2 learners in raising L1 and C1 awareness. Class discussion, for instance, elucidated the conscious perception of a more frequent *aizuchi* use by L1 speakers. It also promoted deep reflection into the underlying C1 of such behavior. Thus, contact with L2 learners facilitated a critical analy-

sis of the Japanese students' own L1 and C1.

In sum, reciprocity can be realized in this type of exchange in Japanese as a lingua franca, and both parties perceived gains in learning. The US students can benefit from this authentic communication of the target language. Additionally, the Japanese students recognized the significance of “intercultural” communication using their first language and developed an awareness of language and culture. Coupled with well-designed and meticulously planned L1 and C1 awareness-raising class activities and lectures, this type of L1-based virtual exchange can enhance Japanese students' ICC.

This study used the *aizuchi* behaviors of Japanese L1 and L2 speakers as an example. Knowledge about the frequent use of reactive tokens in L1 Japanese and possibly less frequent use in other languages will affect their interpretation of the behaviors they encounter and their attitude toward differences. The next step would be understanding the skill of making adjustments, including whether or not they should make adjustments, such as stopping the use of *aizuchi*, reducing the frequency, or continuing to use them as naturally as possible, depending on the situations and interlocutors involved. There would not be a single answer to this question. Still, it is an interesting area to explore from a pedagogical perspective in the interrelated cycle of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are expected of “intercultural speakers,” the notion that Byram (1997) introduced and Kramersch (1998) embraced, among many other scholars. Byram (2008) revisited this topic. Contrasted conceptually with native speakers, intercultural speakers have ICC that encompasses both intercultural competence and linguistic/communicative competence, equipped with the curiosity to explore language and culture, openness toward others, and the skills of interpreting/relating, leading to discoveries as successful communicators (Boye and Byram, 2018).

The 2021 practice, combined with the VE segment, was contrasted with the previous attempts in 2019 and 2020. The 2022 course, currently underway, also orients itself toward helping students become competent intercultural speakers rather than native-like speakers of L2, discourse analysts, or linguistic researchers. The key lies in effectively integrating a reciprocal JLF-mediated VE activity into the syllabus that centers around the L1 interaction analysis to facilitate raising awareness about L1 and C1. This should continue to evolve by constantly reflecting on the practice and its outcome in terms of future implementation.

One contribution of this study is the focus on L1 speakers, which has been underex-

plored in the ICC research that concerns foreign language learning and use; hence L2 learners seemed to be the logical group to assess. This study attempts to fill this gap. However, it is based solely on the findings from one course at one university, although similar student comments are heard from time to time in other locations. Further studies will be necessary to work around this limitation by investigating how the findings in this study can be generalized to a broader Japanese university context.

Acknowledgments

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