



## LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS: INSIGHTS FROM A PRIMARY SCHOOL SYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

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### Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of Japanese primary school students during a synchronous cross-cultural virtual exchange (VE) with Australian peers. The participants included 152 sixth-grade Japanese students and 130 Australian students (63 in fifth grade and 67 in sixth grade). Using Google Meet, students shared information about their locations and the weather, practicing both Japanese and English language skills. Afterward, the Japanese students evaluated their Australian peers' English comprehension and reflected on their exchange experiences. Descriptive statistical methods were applied to the quantitative data, while qualitative responses were analyzed using KH Coder, a text-mining tool for linguistic and content analysis. The results were largely positive, with many Japanese students reporting that they understood the Australian students' English. The VE enhanced cross-cultural understanding by highlighting both similarities and differences. However, the study also identified challenges related to using and understanding a foreign language in real-time exchanges. These findings provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers, offering practical guidance for integrating VE into curricula to support language development, intercultural awareness, and effective teaching practices.

**Keywords:** Virtual exchange, cross-cultural communication, language learning, intercultural awareness, primary education.

### INTRODUCTION

Globalization and technological advancements have profoundly reshaped education, creating unprecedented opportunities for intercultural interaction and collaboration. One innovative approach that has emerged in this context is virtual exchange (VE), which uses digital platforms to connect learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. VE enables direct, real-time interactions that transcend geographical boundaries, offering an immersive and authentic learning environment. Unlike traditional methods of language or cultural study, VE fosters linguistic competence, cultural awareness, and global citizenship (Okumura, 2024a). As education systems strive to prepare students for a highly interconnected world, integrating VE into the curriculum has become essential for equipping learners with critical 21st-century skills (Sierra et al., 2022).

VE has shown significant potential across all educational levels, from primary schools to universities, by enhancing intercultural communicative competence and foreign language skills (Hagley & Cotter, 2019). Research highlights that the success of VE depends on thoughtful program design, technological proficiency, and consistent teacher collaboration (Okumura, 2024b). While large-scale VE initiatives demonstrate the feasibility of widespread adoption, challenges remain. Effective implementation requires careful planning, rigorous assessment, and adaptation to the specific needs of learners (Hagley, 2016).

Primary education is a pivotal stage for engaging young learners in VE, providing an ideal opportunity to foster language acquisition and cross-cultural understanding. However, research on students' experiences and perceptions of real-time cross-cultural interactions remains limited. This study addresses that gap by investigating a synchronous VE program involving primary school



students from Japan and Australia. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and improving this critical phase of learning.

Japan has historically lagged behind other countries in integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into education (OECD, 2019). To address this, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) launched the GIGA School Program in 2019, aiming to provide every student with a device under the slogan “One Device for One Student” (MEXT, 2022). This initiative has significantly impacted primary education, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, helping to reduce the digital divide. By focusing on the experiences of Japanese participants, this study explores the potential of VE to bridge cultural divides, enhance language learning, and foster mutual understanding. It also identifies challenges in implementing VE programs in primary schools, particularly in contexts where ICT for language education is still developing. This research addresses the following questions:

- (1) To what extent do Japanese students feel that they understand the English spoken by their Australian peers in real-time communication?
- (2) What insights do Japanese children gain about Australian culture and perspectives through real-time virtual interactions?

## **Review of literature**

### **The Importance of Intercultural Competence in Digital Education**

Intercultural competence (IC) refers to the ability to interact effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It involves not only understanding one's own cultural identity but also respecting and accepting others' values and perspectives (Byram, 1997). According to Byram (1997), IC comprises five key components. The first is knowledge of different cultures, which lays the foundation for understanding a range of worldviews. The second involves interpretative skills that help individuals grasp both their own and others' perspectives. The third component is the skills for discovery and interaction, enabling individuals to seek out and apply new cultural insights. The fourth is openness and curiosity, which reflect a genuine interest in engaging with unfamiliar cultures. Finally, critical cultural awareness equips individuals to reflect on and evaluate cultural practices—including their own—in an informed and thoughtful way.

Recent studies emphasize that IC is not a fixed ability but a dynamic process developed through ongoing intercultural interaction and self-reflection (Hang & Zhang, 2023). Language education plays a central role in cultivating IC. The integration of digital technologies allows learners to engage in interactive and immersive cross-cultural experiences (Minoia, 2019). Among these approaches, VE has gained attention as an effective method for promoting intercultural communication and global citizenship.

### **VE as an Innovative Educational Strategy**

VE refers to structured educational programs that connect learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds through digital communication technologies. These include asynchronous formats (e.g., Padlet & Wakelet) and synchronous ones (e.g., Zoom and Google Meet). Both formats help bridge geographical and cultural distances, fostering collaboration, dialogue, and critical thinking (O'Dowd, 2018; Satar, 2021). Sims (2022) emphasizes VE's potential to foster empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

Synchronous video conferencing, in particular, enables real-time, authentic communication and boosts learners' motivation and confidence in using foreign languages (Tran et al., 2024). These experiences provide dynamic, real-world learning opportunities that extend beyond traditional classroom settings. However, challenges such as differing language proficiency, peer pressure, and affective barriers may hinder learning outcomes. Therefore, teacher facilitation and mentoring play an essential role. Pintado Gutiérrez et al. (2023) report that students who receive teacher guidance show significant improvement in video conferencing and intercultural communication skills.



## **Practices and Outcomes of Synchronous VE in Primary Education**

Although VE has been widely studied in secondary and higher education, recent research has begun to explore its effectiveness in primary education (Okumura, 2020; Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2022). These studies suggest that, with appropriate support, even young learners can actively participate in intercultural dialogue and language learning activities.

Kimura et al. (2020) examined an inquiry-based VE program conducted between Japanese and Australian primary schools. The program included three synchronous video call sessions using tablets, each designed to promote mutual cultural understanding. Pre- and post-exchange surveys assessed changes in students' communication skills, motivation, and intercultural awareness. The results—especially among Japanese students—showed significant improvements in their ability to communicate, process information, and engage with others. Teachers also noted that students became more proactive, asking questions and displaying greater openness. These findings suggest that repeated, well-structured VEs can effectively support the development of ICs at a formative age.

Shimizu and Kano (2020) conducted a year-long, Skype-based VE project involving Japanese and Taiwanese elementary students. Across five video call sessions, the students shared their hobbies, school experiences, and future aspirations. Post-exchange questionnaires, compared with pre-exchange responses, revealed that students found English more enjoyable and felt more confident using it. Their feedback also demonstrated strong emotional engagement, with remarks such as “I feel like I made a friend” and “I was happy they understood me,” highlighting how meaningful interactions with peers from other cultures can enhance both language motivation and intercultural empathy.

Pennock-Speck and Clavel-Arroitia (2022) studied synchronous video conferencing between Spanish and French primary students. Although the two countries used different instructional approaches—greater learner autonomy in Spain and more teacher-led guidance in France—students in both settings showed high levels of excitement and engagement. Notably, Spanish students produced slightly more linguistic output, suggesting a potential link between autonomy and language use. Despite the pedagogical differences, students from both groups expressed genuine enthusiasm about interacting across borders, underscoring the emotional and motivational impact of VEs in bridging geographic and cultural divides.

Adding a more interaction-focused perspective, Wigham and Whyte (2024) explored a task-based VE activity (*Guess Who!*) involving 7–10-year-old learners from France and Spain. The study examined learner autonomy within a task-based learning teaching framework and analyzed 174 interaction turns. While teachers managed much of the technical and task-related setup, learners independently produced more utterances than those prompted by teachers—especially during the Q&A segments. Despite technical issues such as poor audio or camera quality, students demonstrated initiative and maintained sustained engagement. This study underscores how careful task design and flexible scaffolding can empower young learners to interact meaningfully with international peers, even in low-tech environments.

Extending the scope to reciprocal language use, Koyama and Konishi (2024) implemented an eTandem-style VE program between Japanese sixth graders and Australian secondary students. Participants alternated between Japanese and English, enabling each group to act as both learners and language models. Supported by Japan's GIGA School Program, the project also incorporated nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and gestures, to enhance mutual understanding. Post-exchange surveys and classroom observations revealed increased motivation, linguistic confidence, and intercultural awareness. Even initially hesitant students began participating actively. However, the study also identified challenges, including technical constraints and the need for improved coordination among language teachers, homeroom instructors, and ICT staff. These findings underscore the importance of institutional support in maximizing the benefits of VE in primary education settings.



Together, these studies demonstrate that synchronous VE in primary education is both feasible and beneficial. When embedded within well-planned, scaffolded learning environments, VEs can enhance not only language skills and IC but also learners' emotional investment in global learning. VE thus offers a unique and powerful approach to helping young learners build bridges across geographical and cultural divides.

Building on these findings, the present study implements a cross-cultural VE program involving Japanese and Australian primary students. The following section outlines the methodology employed to design, facilitate, and evaluate this initiative.

## METHOD

### Background

The integration of online exchanges into language education fosters practical language use and intercultural understanding. In Japan, MEXT emphasizes the importance of such exchanges in English as a Foreign Language education to encourage interaction with both local and global communities (MEXT, 2016). Despite this, Japanese students often have limited opportunities to engage with English-speaking peers (Okumura & Uekusa, 2021). To address this gap, the GIGA School Program was introduced, aiming to provide every student with a device and advanced technology to bridge educational disparities, promote digital literacy, and enhance learning through interactive tools and online resources (MEXT, 2020). Similarly, in Australia, students learning Japanese as a foreign language face challenges due to limited interaction with native speakers, which hinders their cultural and linguistic connections. VEs with Japanese peers have been identified as a promising strategy to overcome this issue, boosting students' motivation and cultural understanding (Okumura & Uekusa, 2021).

### Objectives

This project was designed with the following key objectives:

- (1) To enable students to engage in meaningful and purposeful communication in the target language, fostering both fluency and confidence in real-world contexts.
- (2) To provide learners with opportunities to apply the language they are studying in authentic scenarios, helping them appreciate the relevance and practicality of their learning.
- (3) To promote cultural awareness and appreciation by facilitating direct interaction between students and peers from different cultural backgrounds. This direct engagement aims to broaden students' perspectives, foster empathy, and develop cross-cultural communication skills.

By aligning these objectives with the GIGA School Program's vision, the project seeks not only to enhance English language education but also to empower students to become globally minded, technologically proficient individuals who are well-prepared to thrive in an interconnected world.

### Participants

The VE project served as an innovative platform connecting students from two geographically distant schools, fostering meaningful linguistic and cultural exchange. This collaboration involved the following participants:

**The Japanese school:** A group of 152 sixth-grade students, all novice English learners, participated under the guidance of an English specialist teacher. These students had been developing foundational English language skills and were eager to apply their knowledge in an authentic setting.

**The Australian school:** A cohort of 130 fifth- and sixth-grade students, all novice Japanese learners, participated under the supervision of a Japanese specialist teacher. These students had been developing beginner-level proficiency in Japanese and were eager for the opportunity to interact directly with native speakers.





## Implementation

The exchange took place on June 5, 2023, using the Google Meet platform. Prior to the event, teachers from both schools met online to finalize the schedule. They worked together to assign time slots that allowed all students in each class to participate. The final schedule for the exchange is presented in Table 1 below. Variations in exchange durations were due to differences in class end times.

**Table 1.** Schedule for the exchange.

Session	Time	Class		Duration Minutes
		Japanese school	Australian school	
1st	9:05–9:25	6C	6-2	20
2nd	9:40–10:00	6C	6-1	20
3rd	10:55–11:20	6A	6-3	25
4th	11:40–12:00	5C	6-4	20
5th	13:55–14:20	5B	6-5	25

The content of the exchange was carefully aligned with the curricular goals of each school to ensure relevance and maximize educational outcomes. The topics covered during the exchange included the following:

### Japanese Students:

- (1) Practicing self-introductions in English, including sharing their names, ages, and hobbies.
- (2) Describing their city and surroundings, highlighting local landmarks and cultural aspects.
- (3) Sharing their favorite places, offering insight into what they value and enjoy within their community.

### Australian Students:

- (1) Discussing their cities, providing Japanese students with an understanding of Australian urban life and key features of their hometowns.
- (2) Practicing weather forecasts, sharing real-time updates about the weather in their region, and explaining seasonal differences.

For both groups, the activity involved describing their city and surroundings, emphasizing local landmarks and cultural aspects. The exchange was conducted in the style of the Japanese *Karuta* game, a traditional Japanese card game adapted for English listening practice.

This well-structured format not only supported language skill development but also encouraged students to gain deeper insights into each other's cultures. By participating in this exchange, students moved beyond textbook learning to experience how language can serve as a bridge for building global connections and understanding diverse perspectives. The project proved to be an enriching experience, demonstrating the power of technology to create collaborative and immersive educational opportunities that transcend borders.

## Data Collection and Analysis

This study focuses on the experiences of Japanese participants, specifically 152 sixth-grade students from M Elementary School. To gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences, a mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. This methodology provided measurable outcomes alongside nuanced insights.

### Quantitative Data

The quantitative component aimed to measure students' perceptions of their comprehension and engagement during the exchange. Students rated their understanding of Australian English using a structured 4-point Likert scale. This scale assessed their confidence in interpreting and interacting with the Australian accent and expressions, which differ from the standard English typically taught in their classrooms. These ratings provided clear numerical indicators of the students' self-assessed progress and confidence.



## Qualitative Data

To complement the numerical data, qualitative insights were collected through open-ended questions that encouraged students to reflect on their experiences, adding deeper context to their Likert scale responses. Students explained their answers by responding to the prompt, “Why did you choose that answer? Please also write about how you felt at the time,” a question posed in Japanese and translated into English. They also reflected on their discoveries during the exchange, including cultural similarities and differences, communication strategies, and unexpected learning moments, by answering, “Please write about what you discovered through this exchange (similarities and differences with Japan) and your impressions of the exchange.”

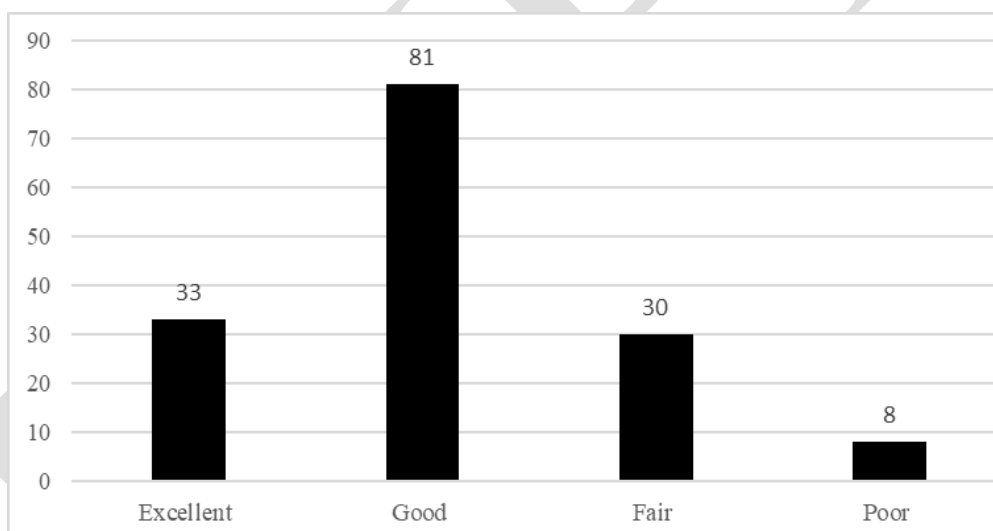
## Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were numerically coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in self-assessed English comprehension. Qualitative responses were examined with KH Coder, a text-mining tool for linguistic and content analysis. This approach enabled systematic identification of recurring themes, such as improved listening skills, increased cultural awareness, and specific challenges. Additionally, it highlighted frequently mentioned words and phrases that reflected students’ main points and the most engaging aspects of the exchange.

## RESULTS, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, and SUGGESTIONS

### Self-Perception of English Understanding

Japanese students' self-perception ratings of understanding English are presented in Figure 1.



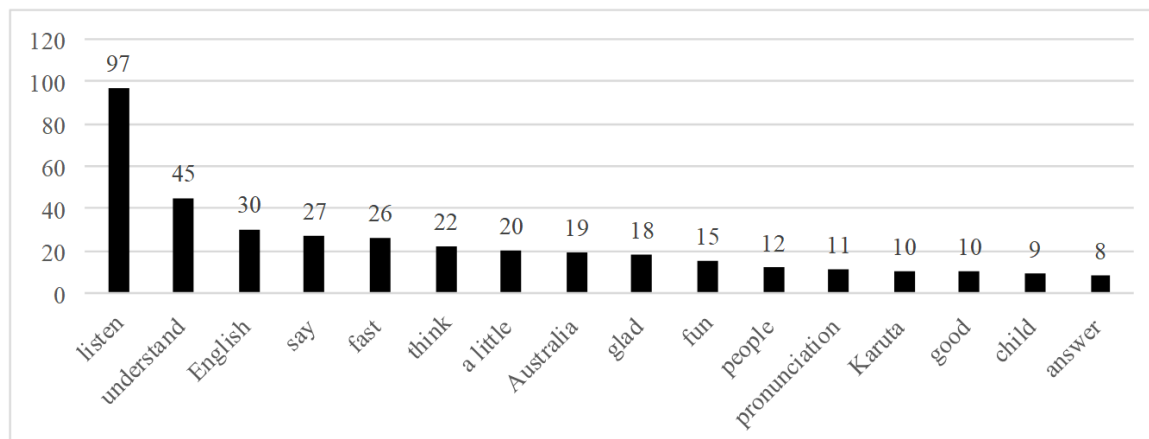
**Figure 1.** Japanese students’ self-perception ratings of understanding English.

Figure 1 shows that a substantial majority of Japanese primary students expressed confidence in their understanding of English during a VE with Australian peers. Specifically, 81 students rated their comprehension as “Good” and 33 as “Excellent,” together representing 75% of participants. In contrast, 38 students rated their comprehension as “Fair” or “Poor,” indicating ongoing challenges for a notable portion of the group. Descriptive statistics reveal an average rating of 2.91 (on a 4-point scale) with a standard deviation of .79, indicating moderate variation in self-perceived comprehension and reflecting diverse individual experiences.



## Linguistic Perceptions and Keyword Insights

Top-appearing words are presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Explanation of their ratings: Top-appearing words.

Figure 2 displays the results of a content analysis of students' open-ended comments, showing frequent mentions of/with frequent mentions of “fast” (26 instances) and “pronunciation” (11 instances). These terms point to two primary linguistic challenges: the rapid pace of Australian English and pronunciation features that differ from classroom instruction. These findings align with Kimura et al. (2020), who observed that young learners often struggle with the rhythm and speed of authentic speech during real-time communication. Their recurrence here suggests that even in mediated settings like VE, such difficulties remain significant.

Beyond linguistic challenges, the analysis reveals clear patterns linked to students' self-assessed comprehension levels. Students who rated their comprehension as “Excellent” often described both clear understanding and emotional satisfaction:

“I was happy that I could hear the English.”  
“Because I understood the meaning.”  
“The pronunciation was good and easy to understand.”

These remarks highlight not only cognitive comprehension but also the emotional benefits of successful interaction—findings consistent with Shimizu and Kano (2020), who found that VE enhances enjoyment and confidence among young learners.

Students selecting “Good” typically expressed partial understanding along with a strong motivation to improve:

“I understood the main idea, but they spoke too fast sometimes.”  
“I was happy I could understand some words, but I want to get better.”  
“Their pronunciation was good, but it was a little too fast to catch everything.”

Such responses indicate growing learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness. As noted by Kimura et al. (2020), repeated VE participation can encourage reflective and proactive engagement with language learning.

Students who rated their comprehension as “Fair” or “Poor” described more specific difficulties, often related to speech rate or intelligibility:

“They spoke too fast, so I couldn't understand.”  
“I could only catch a few words, but it was still fun.”  
“The pronunciation was very different from what we learn in class.”  
“Even though I didn't understand much, I was happy to try.”  
“I want to try again without getting nervous.”



Despite limited comprehension, many expressed enjoyment and a willingness to participate again. This resilience supports findings by Pennock-Speck and Clavel-Arroitia (2022), who emphasize the central role of affective and motivational factors in successful cross-cultural exchanges. VE appears to foster curiosity and perseverance, even in the face of communicative challenges.

Across all proficiency levels, students encountered linguistic barriers, yet many found the experience rewarding. Their comments demonstrate how VE can facilitate not only language exposure but also emotional investment and intercultural growth—key components of communicative competence in young learners. Beyond individual linguistic experiences, the design of the exchange itself played a crucial role in supporting comprehension and engagement.

### **Interactive Task Design and Comprehension Support**

A notable design feature of this VE was the inclusion of the *Karuta* game. In this activity, students listened closely to spoken English clues and raced to select the correct matching card, encouraging both focused listening and quick comprehension. The interactive nature of the *Karuta* game increased engagement and made the language activity more enjoyable. The game was mentioned in 10 student comments, including the following:

“*Karuta* was fun—even if I didn’t get the answer right, I could guess from their tone and expressions.”

In addition to the game itself, gestures and facial expressions used during the exchange played a crucial role in aiding comprehension. Students reported that these nonverbal cues helped them understand the meaning more easily:

“The gestures made it easier to understand.”

Together, the interactive format of *Karuta* and the visual support provided by gestures helped reduce anxiety and sustain engagement, even when full comprehension was difficult. As Wigham and Whyte (2024) argue, scaffolded, task-based approaches can facilitate meaningful interaction—even in environments with technological limitations.

### **Technical and Environmental Barriers**

Several students noted technical and environmental issues that disrupted communication, including poor audio quality, lag, and background noise:

“There was audio distortion and lag.”

“It was hard to hear because it was through a screen.”

These difficulties highlight the importance of robust infrastructure and coordination among teachers and ICT staff, as emphasized by Koyama and Konishi (2024). For VE to succeed, logistical reliability is as essential as pedagogical design.

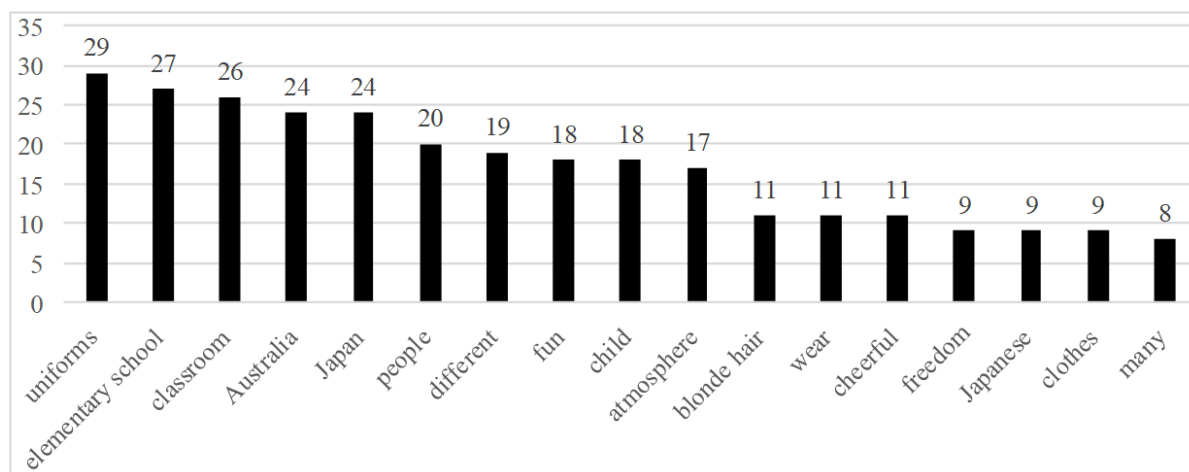
Overall, this study supports the growing body of research affirming the feasibility and value of synchronous VE in primary education. While students faced challenges—especially regarding speech speed, pronunciation, and technical quality—their responses reveal emotional engagement, motivation to improve, and openness to future exchanges. Activities like *Karuta*, multimodal scaffolding, and peer interaction helped ensure that even limited comprehension resulted in meaningful and motivating experiences. When supported by thoughtful design and reliable infrastructure, VE offers young learners valuable opportunities to develop both linguistic skills and IC.

The linguistic insights from this exchange naturally lead to examining how students perceived cultural differences and similarities during their interactions with Australian peers.

### **Impact on Cultural Understanding**

Japanese students' new insights (top-appearing words) are presented in Figure 3.





**Figure 3.** Japanese students' new insights: top-appearing words.

As shown in Figure 3, this VE fostered meaningful cultural awareness among the students. Through their engagement with different aspects of Australian school life, students demonstrated increasing sensitivity to cultural differences. Their reflections covered a range of elements, including school uniforms, classroom environments, interpersonal dynamics, classroom behavior, group structure, and even language use. These observations indicate that students not only noticed cultural distinctions but also began to interpret them in personally meaningful ways.

### Noticing the Visible: Uniforms and Physical Environments

School uniforms emerged as a particularly notable feature, mentioned 29 times. Students expressed curiosity and positive impressions of the Australian students' matching attire:

"They wore uniforms—it was cute!"

"They were wearing something like a uniform."

Physical settings also attracted attention. The term "classroom" was mentioned 26 times, suggesting a strong interest in the spatial elements of the learning environment. Students noticed differences in lighting, layout, and overall appearance:

"The Australian classroom had fluorescent lights like in Japan."

"The Australian classroom was completely different from the Japanese one."

These comments suggest that visible cues—such as clothing and physical space—served as accessible entry points for cultural comparison, sparking deeper reflection on school practices and norms.

### Interpersonal Atmosphere and Classroom Behavior

Students also responded to more subtle features of the learning environment, particularly the emotional tone and behavioral norms within the classroom. Compared to their own experience, many found Australian classrooms to be more relaxed, cheerful, and expressive:

"The atmosphere seemed brighter and more enjoyable than in Japan."

"Everyone was lively and funny."

"It felt a bit freer compared to Japan, and I liked that."

"Many students volunteered to speak, I thought."

Additionally, some students noticed unexpected behaviors—such as classmates bringing stuffed toys to school—that would typically be prohibited in Japanese classrooms. These observations led students to consider how classroom management and expression are shaped by cultural values and expectations. Their responses reflect an emerging understanding that "appropriate" behavior is not universal but culturally specific.



## **Group Dynamics and Educational Structures**

Students also noted differences in classroom size and organization, commenting on how group work or presentations were conducted:

“There weren’t many students, and unlike in Japan, where we showed/viewed images digitally/shared digital images on screen, in Australia, we selected/chose the images physically from the classroom.”

These reflections suggest that students were beginning to connect structural aspects of education—such as class size and instructional methods—to broader differences in how learning feels and functions.

## **Language Awareness and Perspective Shifting**

In a notable shift toward introspection, some students began reflecting on the nature of their own language:

“I learned that the Japanese language is surprisingly difficult for foreigners.”

This comment points to the development of perspective-taking—a foundational element of IC. It indicates a growing ability to see familiar aspects of one’s own culture through an outsider’s eyes, thus fostering empathy and global-mindedness.

## **From Surface Noticing to Cultural Interpretation**

Taken together, these comments reveal more than simple observation—they mark the beginning of interpretive insight. Students moved from noticing visible contrasts to questioning why such differences exist and how they relate to their own experiences. The exchange enabled many participants to reposition themselves in relation to cultural difference, initiating a process of self-reflection and meaning-making.

This shift reflects the early stages of intercultural learning, where learners start to question taken-for-granted norms and explore the cultural foundations of everyday practices. Even a single VE session can act as a catalyst for such growth when supported by opportunities for reflection and interpretation.

## **Cultural Framing and Emotional Response**

Students’ reactions also reflect the influence of their own cultural backgrounds. Many Japanese students expressed surprise at the perceived freedom and expressiveness of their Australian classmates—whether in tone of voice, classroom behavior, or the use of personal items. These contrasts highlight the typically structured, teacher-centered nature of Japanese classrooms, which likely shaped how students perceived and evaluated the VE experience.

This finding aligns with Wigham and Whyte (2024), who observed that learners from autonomy-oriented cultures (e.g., France, Spain) tend to produce more spontaneous output in VE. In contrast, Japanese students in this study appeared more sensitive to emotional tone and behavioral norms than to linguistic production itself. While Kimura et al. (2020) emphasized that repeated VE fosters student initiative over time, this study suggests that even a single VE can trigger strong affective responses and cultural insight.

## **Toward Deeper IC**

Many student comments went beyond description, touching on underlying educational values—such as classroom rules, teacher-student interaction, and communication styles. This supports the view of Pennock-Speck and Clavel-Arroitia (2022), who argue that educational settings are deeply shaped by cultural norms, which in turn influence how learners behave and interpret others.

To move students from surface noticing to interpretive competence, post-exchange reflection is essential. Activities encouraging students to ask why cultural practices differ—and how these differences relate to their own assumptions—can deepen intercultural learning. When guided thoughtfully, students can progress from observation to exploring meaning, laying the foundation for more sophisticated intercultural understanding.



This study shows that well-designed VE experiences can promote cultural awareness and early interpretive thinking among young learners. Students observed visible differences, reflected on implicit norms, and, in some cases, began to reconsider perspectives on their own culture. Even a single, well-supported VE can nurture curiosity, empathy, and metacognitive growth. Ultimately, VE offers not only exposure to other ways of being but also a framework for thinking more deeply about one's place in an interconnected world.

These cultural insights were closely linked to changes in students' attitudes toward language learning and their motivation to continue developing their English skills.

### **Impact on Motivation and Learning**

The VE significantly enhanced students' motivation to learn English. Many participants described the experience as both meaningful and enjoyable, supporting previous findings (e.g., Kimura et al., 2020) that emphasize the role of authentic, communicative tasks in fostering engagement—especially when learners use language in real, social contexts.

Student comments reflected both emotional satisfaction and a desire to improve:

"I was happy that I could communicate with the students from overseas."

"I want to improve my listening skills so I can win at *Karuta* next time."

These reflections suggest that VE not only made English learning more enjoyable but also inspired future-oriented goals, linking successful interaction with personal learning aspirations.

### **Cultural Dimensions of Motivation**

While these findings align with studies on the motivational effects of real-world language use, they also raise questions about how motivation is shaped by cultural context. For example, Pennock-Speck and Clavel-Aroitia (2022) found that Spanish students became more motivated when given opportunities for autonomy and spontaneous expression. In contrast, Japanese students in this study appeared to draw motivation from emotional fulfillment, positive social interactions, and the novelty of international connection—rather than from language production or performance alone.

This suggests that VE programs should consider learners' cultural expectations and emotional drivers when designing activities to boost engagement across diverse educational contexts.

### **Enhancing Engagement Through Design**

Despite some challenges—such as fast speech or limited comprehension—students remained positively engaged. Features such as clear pronunciation, nonverbal cues (e.g., gestures), and interactive tasks like *Karuta* helped reduce difficulties and sustain motivation.

These findings are consistent with research showing that VE supports not only linguistic development but also intercultural understanding and learner confidence, even at the beginner level (e.g., Hagley, 2016; Canals, 2020; Okumura, 2024a). However, ongoing barriers—such as language gaps and varying school structures—highlight the need for thoughtful and adaptable design. Scaffolding strategies that incorporate explicit communication, multimodal support, and peer collaboration can further enhance VE's effectiveness.

This study reinforces the growing body of evidence that VE can serve as a powerful catalyst for motivation in language learning. When carefully designed and paired with reflective practice, VE enables students to engage in meaningful communication, develop intercultural awareness, and set personal learning goals. By linking enjoyment with effort and purpose, VE fosters a dynamic learning environment that supports both linguistic and emotional growth—especially for young learners in culturally diverse settings.

### **Conclusion**

This study underscores the transformative potential of VE in primary education, particularly in strengthening students' language proficiency, cultural awareness, and motivation. By connecting



learners across linguistic and cultural boundaries, VE enables meaningful, real-time communication that goes beyond textbook learning and nurtures empathy and global citizenship from an early age.

Although students encountered challenges—such as rapid speech, unfamiliar pronunciation, and technical limitations—many navigated these difficulties by relying on strategies such as clear pronunciation, gestures, and visual cues. These interactions promoted not only linguistic growth but also curiosity, intercultural reflection, and enjoyment of communication. Learners demonstrated a shift from surface-level observation to deeper cultural interpretation, reflecting the initial stages of IC.

To fully realize the benefits of VE, several practical considerations must be addressed. First, teacher preparation is essential. Both native and non-native speakers should receive guidance on adjusting their speech and incorporating nonverbal strategies to enhance comprehension, particularly for younger or less proficient learners. Second, institutional coordination plays a crucial role. VE initiatives require advance planning for scheduling, technological setup, and alignment of learning objectives. Clear communication among educators and early administrative approval are critical to ensuring smooth implementation and long-term sustainability. Third, pedagogical design should prioritize culturally relevant, interactive tasks—such as *Karuta*—that integrate verbal and visual elements. These activities help reduce anxiety, encourage participation, and foster students' reflection on their own cultural backgrounds. Such tasks have been shown to support motivation and learner autonomy, even among young students. Finally, curricular integration is key. Embedding VE within broader language or intercultural education frameworks—combined with structured opportunities for reflection—can turn even a single session into a lasting learning experience.

While technical difficulties and linguistic differences remain ongoing challenges, they can be mitigated through deliberate scaffolding, thoughtful design, and environmental preparation. In this way, VE becomes more than a language activity—it serves as a holistic educational approach that fosters communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity, and learner confidence.

VE offers a compelling and scalable method for preparing young learners for an increasingly interconnected world. By bridging classroom instruction with global interaction, VE enriches language education and fosters the skills, mindsets, and values students need to succeed in multicultural, collaborative environments. When thoughtfully implemented, it represents a promising pathway toward inclusive, future-oriented education.

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### **Ethics and Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that this article is his original work, has not been plagiarized, and complies with ethical research and publication standards. Research permissions were obtained from the school principal and the students' parents at the Japanese school. All ethical rules were observed at each stage of the research. The author declares that he acted in accordance with ethical rules in all processes of the research. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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