Intercultural Interactions in Higher Education: Challenges, Innovations, and Lessons Learned in a Japanese Context

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As many students at international universities in Japan find it difficult to make friends outside of their own linguistic groups, this paper discusses a project involving two linked initiatives with different approaches to using social media to encourage connections between international and domestic students. It describes the impetus behind the project, the rationales for each of the two approaches, the methods that each used, and their results. Although it was beyond the scope of this project to determine whether it led to any improvement in connections, several positive outcomes emerged. These included student validation of the need for such interventions, the creation of engaging content, and valuable insights into the effectiveness of different strategies for conducting such a project. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for future efforts to foster connections between international and domestic students.

　日本の国際大学で学ぶ学生の多くは、自身の言語コミュニティの外で友人を作ることが困難であると感じている。本稿は、留学生と国内学生のつながりを深めるために、ソーシャルメディアを活用して行った2つの取り組みについて報告する。主に、プロジェクトの背景、各アプローチの理論的根拠、それぞれの試みで用いた方法と結果について述べる。プロジェクトにより学生間のつながりが促進されたかどうかについては今後検証が必要だが、いくつかの肯定的な結果が得られた。これらの結果には、学生がこのようなプロジェクトによる介入の必要性を認識していること、魅力的なコンテンツを構築すること、プロジェクトを推進するにあたり異なる手法が効果的であろうという重要な洞察が含まれている。最後に、留学生と国内学生のつながりを今後促進させていくための実践的な方法を提案する。

Readers who have studied a foreign language abroad can likely identify with one of the following two experiences: Either they fully immersed themselves in the foreign language environment, or they shied away from that daunting challenge and largely stuck to socializing with others from their own first language group. Working at an international university in Japan, we see both types of learners among our international students. Some throw themselves into activities where they will interact with others from different linguistic backgrounds, using English and/or Japanese as a lingua franca supplemented by their other linguistic resources; others mostly cook, hang out, and chat with those who share a mother tongue. The same is true of some Japanese students. Many find that the cosmopolitan friendships they dreamed of are tantalizingly just out of reach.

These observations raise important questions about the factors influencing international and domestic students' cultural orientations and the challenges these students face in integrating when they reach the university campus. Taniguchi, Takai, and Skowronski (2022) explored these dynamics through semi-structured interviews with 41 international students from China, the UK, and the US who were enrolled in large public universities in Tokyo and Nagoya for at least one semester. They identified two major categories of cultural contact orientations: intercultural contact orientation (assimilation to the host culture) and intracultural contact orientation (separation from the host culture). Their findings indicated that international students often struggled to balance their desire to integrate into Japanese culture with their need to maintain ties to their home culture, a challenge amplified by host nationals' perception of these students as "foreigners." Similarly, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood's (2018) study of international students in the United States highlighted the potential for both formal university programs and informal social interactions to facilitate longer lasting international connections. They suggested that universities have the power to support meaningful cross-cultural interaction; however, active commitment from both international and domestic students is required for such initiatives to be effective. Together, these studies demonstrate

that crafting genuine intercultural connections in Japan's academic settings demands intentional strategies and adaptability from both students and institutions alike.

In light of these challenges, the Japanese government's initiatives—most notably the Top Global University Project and the Global 30 Project—aim to transform Japanese higher education into a more internationalized endeavor. However, Hofmeyr's (2021) study of such formal programs raises concerns about the actual efficacy of such formal programs. Despite the intent of these initiatives, Hofmeyr found that authentic intercultural interactions and the development of intercultural competence among students are not as common as one would hope. This insight raises the question of whether these structured efforts are sufficient or whether the solution lies in fostering more organic, student-led interactions outside the academic environment.

This ongoing challenge is not unique to Japan. Volet and Ang (1998) highlighted the educational advantages of intercultural contact and have advocated for the role of multicultural campuses in promoting intercultural understanding. However, subsequent research by Summers and Volet (2008) and by Geeraert et al. (2014) indicates that students often retreat to their cultural comfort zones, a phenomenon observed in educational institutions worldwide, from Australia to the UK and Belgium.

It was against this background that we set out to test ways of bringing domestic and international students together. Comprising two English-language lecturers and one Japanese-language lecturer, our team launched a project called Campus Connections, which we began by surveying students about their experiences. For context, the student body is a near 50-50 split between "English-basis" students, who take the majority of their classes in English, and "Japanese-basis" students, who take the majority of their classes in Japanese. This status is determined by language proficiency testing at admission, and almost all students take language classes in their weaker language. Of the students who responded to our bilingual online survey (N = 568), there were more Japanese-dominant respondents (58.6%) than English-dominant ones (41.4%), but both groups were well represented. The survey included 22 items (see Appendix for a link to a duplicate of the survey), with a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions (mostly on a four-point Likert scale, from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree). It also made use of branching. In other words, the question items respondents saw varied according to their responses to earlier items.

Our survey found that despite their awareness of the many mixing opportunities already available to them—survey respondents were presented with a list of 10 university-related organizations and asked which ones they were aware of, and seven of the 10 options were selected by 98 or more of them—students desired more ways to meet their linguistic counterparts (e.g., 97% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I would like to have more opportunities to meet people from other countries and cultures"). They also reported wanting the university to provide these opportunities (e.g., 92% answered "yes" to the question "Would you like [institution name] to provide more opportunities for you to meet people from other countries and cultures?"). Additionally, from five response options to the question "Which of the following online activities for meeting people from other countries and cultures would you be interested in taking part in? Choose as many options as you like."), the preferred means of making connections was via social media ("Social media group—a social media app moderated by [institution name] faculty and TAs to connect students with similar interests and to promote language and cultural exchange"). This finding was unsurprising as, because of COVID-related travel restrictions, many students at that time were attending virtual lessons from their hometowns and home countries. In response to the question item "Most events nowadays are organized online or via social media. Would you be interested in joining a social media group for connecting domestic and international [institution name] students?," 53% responded "yes" and a further 31% responded "maybe." Recognizing a clear demand for a platform that encourages social media interaction among students, we decided to set such an initiative in motion.

The First Iteration

The first iteration of the project was carried out in the 2021 academic year, when most teaching was being conducted remotely. Our idea was to create bilingual social media groups that would only be open to students at our university. The first challenge was to select a suitable social media platform. One might think that finding a platform catering to our needs would be straightforward. However, the reality was different. Although most university students already possess social media accounts, the platforms that are most common among students in Japan, such as Instagram and Line, lacked the features we needed. Restricting group memberships based on institutional affiliations posed a particular challenge. (Although Line has a feature for limiting

access to public groups, that feature is not available on phones purchased outside of Japan.) One of the project team members explored various lesser known apps and even corresponded with several app developers. Ultimately, we selected an American app called LoopChat, tailored for university students. This platform mandated an institutional email address for account creation to ensure that access was limited to valid university-affiliated individuals, thus creating a more secure environment for effective communication.

Next, we chose the top six areas of interest that students taking our survey had said they would like to talk to new friends about: music, future goals, sports, movies, on-campus/local city events, and travel. To encourage engagement in and prevent abuse of our chat groups, we used Faculty Initiative Program funds to hire three bilingual chatroom moderators from among our more senior students—one for every two chatrooms. We trained our student moderators (two domestic students and one international student) and launched the Campus Connections chatrooms with a university-wide digital publicity campaign. Furthermore, as an activity to deepen the understanding of communication through social media, we invited a speaker from the UK's Open University to provide students and staff with an online workshop on proper emoji use.

At first, all went well. Students joined the chatrooms with an apparent mix of Japanese-dominant and English-dominant students. The moderators often welcomed new members individually in both languages, invited them to introduce themselves, and initiated new exchange threads. Although there were no major differences in the way domestic and international students formed connections, the majority of students seemed to write in both languages or to write some content in the language that was easier for them. Some rooms were quite lively. However, this initial burst of activity did not last more than a few weeks, and soon the chatrooms became very quiet.

Follow-up interviews with the moderators suggested some reasons as to why chatroom use declined as it did. First, adapting to new platforms while maintaining the essence of authentic interactions proved more challenging than anticipated. Second, the fact that students had to use an unfamiliar app also likely caused some to lose interest.

Moreover, an unforeseen challenge that greatly impacted our initiative was a drastic redesign of the app interface. An update transformed it from a straightforward messaging and photo sharing platform to something resembling a dating app, which understandably might have deterred our student participants. While the developers eventually reversed these changes, our users had largely abandoned the app by then. Clearly, the original vision of our project, at least in its digital form, had been compromised.

However, the Campus Connections team remained resilient. As the new academic year brought students back to the physical campus, we revised our strategy. Our renewed objective was to integrate face-to-face interactions, effectively blending virtual exchanges with tangible encounters.

Campus Connections Redux

For the second iteration, which took place in the 2022 academic year, when most students were back on campus, we decided to use social media to encourage students to attend events where they could meet new people. We again hired students—this time as social media managers—and collaborated with them and used their skills to create a plan with two components. After discussions with the university's student office, we realized that students were lacking a unified digital platform for information about upcoming events, so the first component was a social media feed to let students know what was going on at the university and in its host city. Guided by feedback from our TA moderators from the first iteration and recognizing its popularity among students, we selected Instagram as our feed's platform. The social media managers collected information about upcoming events from contacts at the city hall and from various campus groups and organizations and then used their creative skills to re-post the information in eye-catching ways to an Instagram account, which was advertised around campus.

For some of the events, these posts also included links to temporary chatrooms where students could discuss their plans to attend the events and find others who were interested in going. This was the second component of the project. Although platforms like Instagram offer group capabilities, they lack the privacy and exclusivity features we required, so we decided on another platform that many students would already be familiar with: Discord, a platform known for its community-building tools and private chat capabilities. The idea was that students who were looking to meet new people—either to practice their language skills or to connect with individuals from different backgrounds—would discover selected events through the Instagram feed, join a temporary chat group to make plans to attend, and then connect with others

at these events. We gave our social media managers specific roles based on their skills and interests and asked them to manage the day-to-day running of the project.

The project continued in this way for one semester. The social media managers reported back to our team and met with us as necessary. The more successful of the two components was the Instagram part, which attracted over 200 followers and an average of 52 account views per post. Users often liked the posts but rarely saved them, suggesting limited engagement. The initiative seemed to work well as a public service for students, but success for us meant getting students to make connections, which was where the Discord groups were supposed to help.

Although 100 students joined our Discord channel during its run, engagement with the groups was minimal, despite the best efforts of our "chat moderator" social media manager. As with the chat groups from the previous year's iteration, students seemed reluctant to post anything. Once again, it seemed that the critical mass needed to create active users had not been achieved. On the positive side, though, our student employees again had very valuable insights into why this had happened and had excellent ideas for how such a project could be more successful in the future.

Unfortunately, our team is not in a position to be able to commit to a third iteration of Campus Connections, but we would like to share what we learned from debriefing with our student employees here in the hope that someone somewhere else might be able to more fully succeed in bringing international and domestic students together through a similar initiative.

Suggestions for Similar Initiatives in the Future

Our social media managers still believed in the value of the project to the end. They could see the need to support students in getting together across language barriers. Thus, they felt that the following design changes might make the project more popular with students.

- Clearly communicate goals: Clearly communicate the primary goal of any initiative, whether for socializing, academic discussions, or event promotions, to help set students' expectations.
- Publicize events effectively: Rather than simply encouraging interaction in chat groups, it seems more effective to promote an event and use it as a stimulus to create interaction.

- Adapt to social media algorithms: Understand and optimize social media algorithms to ensure maximum visibility and engagement and potentially generate a higher frequency of posts or more interactive content.
- Engage with campus organizations: Collaborate with existing campus organizations or groups to tap into established networks and further the initiative's reach.
- Encourage active participation: Encourage student managers or representatives to attend events and activities to provide them with firsthand experience to later share and promote.
- Implement feedback mechanisms: Regularly collect feedback from participants to understand what is working well and where improvements can be made.
- Foster cultural exploration: Create environments or events where stepping out of one's cultural comfort zone is encouraged, but also ensure that support systems are in place for students who feel intimidated.
- Blend virtual and physical events: Even in conditions not requiring social distancing, consider a blend of virtual and physical events to cater to different comfort levels and logistical challenges.
- Provide cultural sensitivity training: Offer sessions or workshops on cultural sensitivity to both domestic and international students to make the mingling process smoother and more engaging for all parties.

By the nature of what we set out to do, it is very difficult to quantify how many students our interventions were able to help (e.g., how many students made online contacts, went to an event they would otherwise not have attended, or made new friends). We certainly feel that even small numbers of successes in these areas would make our efforts worthwhile, and we remain convinced by the feedback we received that there is still a need for similar projects to help students make that initial leap into socializing with students from outside their native language groups. As highlighted in recent studies from around the world, the persistence of "cultural comfort zones" further reinforces the need for projects like Campus Connections to encourage students to venture beyond their linguistic boundaries. With the insights we have gained from our two-year project, we hope that sharing our experiences here will inspire others to consider ways in which they, too, can encourage students to connect at their own institutions.

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JALT THT SIG *Laos 2024 Program*

We have been invited to assist with the following programs:

1. *Exploring Inner Space, Mindful Education* led by Trish Sumerfield
2. Lao TESOL Proceedings. Mentor Lao writers online. Submit an article for publication.
3. Assist with the development of test materials (Lao Ministry of Education and Sport)
4. Stay for a year. Are you retired or on leave? Work with English teachers and students at the National University of Laos. No salary, but lots of warm heartwarming experiences.
5. Present on fee paying tertiary education opportunities in Japan for Lao students
6. Assist with planning English education programs for the *Save the Children Fund* in refugee camps on the Thai/Burmese Border.

https//tht-japan.org

Appendix

A duplicate of the survey instrument described in the paper can be viewed at the following link: https://forms.office.com/r/h45hjJPdvB

Note: Because the form uses branching, some items will not be immediately visible.

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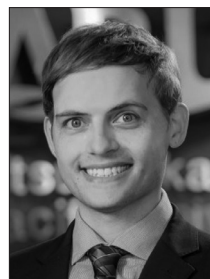
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JALT's Mission

JALT promotes excellence in language learning, teaching, and research by providing opportunities for those involved in language education to meet, share, and collaborate.

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