



Promoting intercultural engagement in beginner language courses: Principles and implementation

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Abstract

Developing language learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been widely recognized as a critical aspect of language teaching. Yet, integrating an intercultural perspective and practices into language classrooms is often neglected, especially for beginner learners, partly due to their limited linguistic abilities. This report presents a collaborative effort by language researchers and educators to develop and implement an interculturally-oriented intervention project in first-semester Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language courses. The three-part intervention was designed to enhance beginner learners' intercultural reflective learning, addressing a complex interplay of factors—from societal ideologies to specific individual interactions in intercultural settings—that contribute to hurdles faced by learners of the three languages. Reflections on the intervention, challenges, and limitations are discussed with implications for curriculum development and program planning.

Keywords: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Intercultural Communicative-Competence

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Introduction

Developing language learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been widely recognized as a critical aspect of language teaching (Byram, 2021; Byram & Wagner, 2018; Kramsch, 1997, 2006, 2011; Leung & Scarino, 2016; Moeller & Osborn, 2014) in our increasingly multicultural and globalized world. Rather than presenting the unrealistic goal for language learners to become like native speakers, the intercultural approach to language teaching shifts the focus to fostering interculturally capable language learners who can effectively and harmoniously “interpret, create, and exchange meanings across different languages and cultures” (Scarino, 2010, p.326) while becoming socialized into the additional language and culture. Under this approach, language learners are viewed as active participants in their language learning process, not only by using the language but also by analyzing how language and culture come into play in communication involving people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Scarino, 2010). This approach encourages them to step outside of their own linguistic and cultural norms, practices, and values and develop the capability to recognize, appreciate, and handle the differences and otherness in intercultural encounters.

Given the importance of ICC development in language teaching, what kinds of ICC-oriented curricular strategies can be implemented? A recent study on intercultural language learning (Hwang, Sato, & He, 2024) has shown that language learners' out-of-class intercultural engagement, such as meaningful and frequent interactions with speakers of the target language (TL) and, in particular, TL-related pop culture

media and social media, significantly benefits learners in developing ICC. They argue that through these interpersonal and intrapersonal engagements mediated by the TL, learners are afforded opportunities that go beyond simple communication. These intercultural engagement experiences allow them to monitor and reflect on the discursive and dynamic nature of communication and cultural differences, understand the significance of language and cultural pluralism for oneself and others, and apply their renewed understanding of oneself and of others to further communication and interactions with persons and media from other cultures. While ICC refers to the capability to interact interculturally, which is best understood as an ongoing process with “no final end point” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010, p.5), intercultural engagement serves as the vehicle for this process, the practical means through which intercultural attitudes, skills, and knowledge are actively employed and refined.

While the importance of developing ICC through intercultural engagement in language teaching is increasingly recognized, many challenges remain in incorporating them into classroom instruction. Some language instructors, who may not be familiar with ICC, often view language teaching from a traditional, “monologic and individualistic” perspective (Pekarek Doehler, 2019), primarily focusing on linguistic and communicative skills, especially for beginner learners with limited linguistic proficiency. Even with the understanding of the importance of fostering ICC through intercultural engagement, implementing it into existing teaching practices and assessments can be an overwhelming task for an individual instructor. There is a practical concern about allocating appropriate amounts of time to both language instruction and intercultural engagement. The needs of learners for ICC development also need to be understood in the context of their learning environments and intercultural resources available to them.

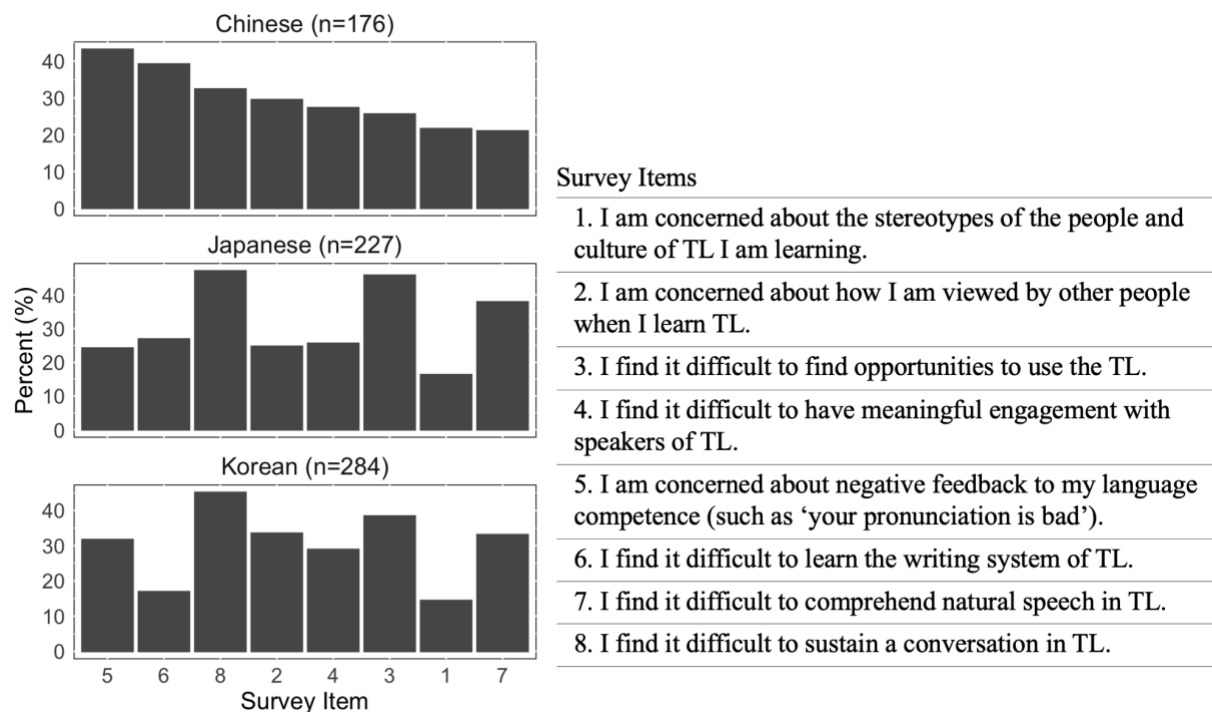
This report presents a collaborative initiative launched to address these challenges within a department offering Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language courses in Stony Brook University, a public university in the United States. Eight faculty members from the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language programs, including the three authors of the current report, collaborated to develop a set of intercultural engagement interventions for beginner language learners. The members of this group, with expertise in applied linguistics and extensive experience in language teaching, contributed to specific parts of the project, bringing their unique perspectives and expertise.

Motivation of the Intercultural Engagement Intervention

To better understand our students’ needs in the context of learning Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, we first analyzed one section of a survey¹ from a larger research project on intercultural engagement and ICC among Asian language learners, which explores how learners engage with individuals from the TL culture and consume TL-related pop culture and social media, what challenges they face in language learning, and how learners perceive their ICC in light of their language and culture learning experiences. The items in this survey section were developed based on focus group interviews with learners of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, as detailed in Hwang et al. (2024). This section of the survey asked the participants to select up to three challenges they faced in learning the TL. The data reported here were from the surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), the challenges range from specific language skills, such as comprehending natural speech or learning the writing system of the TL, to interactional and situational difficulties, such as sustaining conversations in the TL, finding opportunities to use TL, meaningfully engaging with speakers of the TL, or handling negative feedback to their language skills. Additionally, there were shared concerns regarding societal perceptions of the people and culture of the TL or their position as language learners within a larger social and cultural context related to the TL.

¹ The survey is publicly available on IRIS-database: <https://www.iris-database.org/details/tH5mp-LdgCG>

Figure 1. Challenges faced by learners of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean: proportion of respondents in each group who selected the item (items listed in the order based on the percentage of the Chinese group's responses)



While there were variations among the three language groups², from an intercultural perspective, these student voices suggest the need for removing unrealistic expectations and creating safe spaces where learners can (i) explore language and cultural resources that help sustain and maintain communicative interactions in social contexts (item 8), (ii) socialize and engage with fluent speakers of TL through purposeful activities without the fear of being criticized (item 3, 4, 5), and (iii) discuss and address language ideologies, linguistic diversity and variations, and identity in the context of language learning to build on the strengths of a multilingual and multicultural community (item 1, 2).

The instructors' observations recorded in their journal entries within a shared document also align with students' experiences. They have observed that many students lack interactional competence, defined as the ability to 'jointly' construct discourse using linguistic and interactional resources across diverse contexts (Young, 2011). For instance, even students with adequate linguistic proficiency may still struggle with basic organizational skills for effective interactions such as turn-taking, turn allocation, topic management, or repair strategies in an ongoing dynamic interaction (e.g., Ohta, 2001; Seedhouse 2005; Waring, 2019), which could potentially lead to intercultural exchanges that are inappropriate, ineffective, or awkward. We consider that interactivity is fundamental to intercultural communication because it is through interaction—not just language alone—that ICC becomes a reality. Understanding ICC from the interactional perspective is, therefore, crucial. Instructors have also noted that while students have opportunities to interact with Teaching Assistants who are fluent in the TL, these interactions typically focus on tasks such as explaining grammar and word use, reviewing course materials, or clarifying instructions for assignments rather than

² The language skill-related challenges varied the most across the three groups due to the writing system differences (item 6) and the fact that the Chinese group, which had the most heritage learners, faced less difficulty with comprehension (item 7).

actively engaging in conversations. Taken together, there is a significant need to address this missed opportunity for richer and more collaborative engagement where students “tune to each other” than try to move to the “target”.

Informed by student experience, instructor insights, and current literature on ICC (Byram, 2021; Kramsch, 1997, 2006, 2011; C. Leung & Scarino, 2016), we established principles that guided our efforts in implementing an intercultural engagement intervention, as shown below. While not all principles may seem uniquely linked to ICC or specific results from previous studies, each is created to support the overarching goal of transitioning from performance-based to intercultural reflective pedagogies. It is important to keep in mind that the teaching should focus on the learner rather than on the language itself (Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011) and consider students’ growth and empowerment as individuals through specific language learning activities.

1. Consider the language learner as a participant user and a learner/analyzer (Scarino, 2009);
2. Stay open-minded to students and accept them as they are in terms of their language identities and language proficiency;
3. Enhance authenticity from the TL culture with real-life materials and purposeful communicative tasks and activities;
4. Introduce language variation (Blattner, Dalola, & Roulon, 2023) and address language ideology;
5. Provide linguistic and interactional resources necessary to sustain social interactions in TL (Betz & Huth, 2014; Wong & Waring, 2021);
6. Keep in mind that Asian culture is already an integral part of multilingual/multicultural American society;
7. Create opportunities that foster genuine interest in using TL, such as activities relevant to day-to-day lives, topics that learners enjoy talking about, and opinions and inquiries that will make a difference for them.

Guided by these principles, we developed an intercultural engagement intervention comprising three main components, which will be introduced in the following sections.

Intercultural Engagement Intervention

The intercultural engagement intervention was implemented in six first-semester Chinese, Japanese, and Korean courses throughout the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 semesters. The components included Pair-up Activities, TA Time, and Discussion Forum, each of which had its own purpose and goal, yet collectively aimed to promote authentic, critical, and social intercultural engagement. Given that the class time is mainly allocated for the existing language curriculum, the intervention was designed to be out-of-class tasks³, either as activities during asynchronous online recitations or as a form of assignments. All courses adopted the same components, while specific materials and activities for each component were aligned with the topics of each language course for coherency and consistency. The number of activities for each component varied by language course. To provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their intercultural engagement, students were invited to write about their experiences with the intervention components throughout the semester. The following sections will detail the three components, each featuring a sample material from the Chinese, Japanese, or Korean courses.

Intervention # 1: Pair-up Activities

The primary goal of the Pair-up Activities is to help students understand the characteristics of culture-specific moment-by-moment interactions and equip them with interactional competence, which is particularly relevant to supporting students in sustaining natural and interactive conversations in TL. For each Pair-up Activity, students were instructed to: (i) pair up with another peer student; (ii) observe naturally occurring social interactions in TL culture, typically in reality shows or dramas broadcasted in TL

³ One section of the Chinese courses did the Pair-up Activities during in-person recitations.

culture that feature interactional resources discussed in the lesson (Principles 3, 5); (iii) analyze similarities and differences from their own language and culture in the way the interactional features are used (Principle 1); and (iv) apply some of the interactional resources in TL to their own conversations with their partner through a role-play to experiment with the newly learned feature (Principles 3, 5, 7).

Considering the proficiency level of beginner learners, we selected interactional resources that are easy to observe and apply and are useful for the beginner level, such as response tokens, repair strategies, common sequencing practices for invitation or request, or discourse markers for expressing feelings, emotions, or stances. The materials were adopted from pop culture media in TL because students need to be exposed to authentic social exchanges in TL to learn how people interact. Authentic materials are also very rich in other cultural norms and behaviors, containing aspects that students are generally interested in learning as language learners (Pai & Duff, 2021). Role-play tasks were aligned with the class topics. [Table 1](#) shows each unit of the Pair-up Activities for the Chinese and Japanese language courses (See Hwang, 2023 for the Korean counterparts).

Table 1. *Instructional targets and role-play tasks in each Pair-up Activity from Chinese and Japanese beginner-level language courses*

Chinese	Japanese
<p>PA 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response tokens <p>哦 oh, 嗯 um, 对 yes, 对 right /对对对 right right right</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repetitions • Intonation in context • Non-verbal cues nodding, eye-contacting <p>Role-play task: Meeting a Chinese roommate first time, greet and introduce each other</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response tokens <p>へえええ huh, ふううん hmmm, えっ what?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair <p>すみません。もういちどいってください Excuse me. Say it again, please, ってなんで すか what is ...?</p> <p>Role-play task: Find out each other's preferred food</p>
<p>PA 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic shift <p>对了 oh, by the way</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repair strategies <p>什么 what, 嗯 um (with rising intonation), 可以再说一遍吗? Could you please say it one more time?</p> <p>Role-play task: Talk about personal background such as hometown, area of study, interest in learning Chinese with your TA in student cafeteria</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response tokens <p>ええ yes, ええと let's see, あのう ummm, そうですね indeed</p> <p>Role-play task: Introduce each other for the first time in a college classroom</p>
<p>PA 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final particles <p>啊ah, 呀ya, 吧ba, 哦o, 嘛ma, 呢ne</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer-acceptance sequences <p>あのう、すみません Excuse me., つまらないものですけど it's something trivial,</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourse connectors <p>然后 then, 那 then</p>	<p>but ..., どうぞ please take it</p>
<p>Role-play task: Talk about living conditions, family background, etc. with a friend of your roommate at the International Student Party</p>	<p>Role-play task: Introduce yourself to your new neighbor and offer a gift</p>
<p>PA 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitation-acceptance sequences <p>怎么样 how does that sound, 一起.....吧 let's go..., 走吧 let's go, 去 go</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitation-refusal sequences <p>不想 don't want to, 还得 still have to..., 可是 but</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response tokens (newsmark and evaluation) <p>...んですか Is it true that ...?, そうですか Is it so?, ああ、いいですね Oh, that's great!, へええ、おもしろいですね Oh, that's interesting., たいへんですねえ That's a trouble.</p>
<p>Role-play task: at Starbucks, invite the new friend to an event; Accept or decline according to your own interests and plans</p>	<p>Role-play task: Talk about each other's pastime activities</p>
<p>PA 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitation-acceptance sequences • Invitation-refusal sequences <p>要不 how about.., 我得 I have to..</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitation-acceptance sequences <p>...ませんか How about ...ing? ...はどうですか How about ...?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invitation-decline sequences <p>ちょっと That's a bit ..., ...んです It's That's why.</p>
<p>Role-play task: Plan a dinner over the phone</p>	<p>Role-play task: Invite your partner to some activity</p>

Note. Abbreviation: PA, Pair-up Activity.

The sample Pair-up Activity unit (<https://osf.io/ejt4y>) from the Chinese course (Week 4) was designed to align with the first weeks of learning self-introduction and greeting. This activity aimed to equip students with essential interactional resources in Chinese such as response tokens for acknowledgement, backchanneling cues, or repeating the previous turn to help them become an engaged listener in a conversation. Paired-up students first observed a short reality show (less than two minutes) broadcasted in China, where two young men introduced themselves to each other. After watching the video, students analyzed the social setting of the conversation and interactional features shown in the video, guided by the questions in the worksheet. They also compared and contrasted these with the interactional features available in their language and culture. After the discussion, they were invited to create, perform, and record their conversation and share it with the class. Some of these recordings were then watched and discussed in class.

Intervention # 2: TA Time

The primary goal of TA Time is to foster students' ICC through communicative interactions. This is achieved by providing a safe space where they can engage in purposeful and authentic communicative interactions (Principle 3) about topics relevant to their day-to-day lives (Principle 7) with fluent TL speakers

and peer learners without the fear of their proficiency being judged (Principle 2, 5). We aimed to design this TA Time setting not as a place for tutoring between learners and helpers, but as a social space where participants engage in activities together. For each TA Time, students were required to: (i) sign up and prepare for the session; (ii) participate in the scheduled session and complete given tasks through communication with their peers and the TA in their group; and (iii) submit a report about their experience in the session.

In the Chinese and Korean programs, international students from China and Korea, respectively, served as TAs, whereas the Japanese program recruited both international students from Japan and advanced-level students of Japanese as TAs due to the small number of international students from Japan on campus. Each TA session was conducted in small groups (with 1-4 students per TA) so that students could speak more freely and comfortably. Students were allowed to sign up for a different TA session each time, with the chance to engage with different TAs and peers. [Table 2](#) shows each unit of the TA Time activities for the Chinese and Japanese courses (See Hwang, 2023 for the Korean counterparts). We shared ICC-oriented teaching goals with the TAs and instructed them to employ strategies that bilingual speakers use in real life, such as repeating, rephrasing, clarifying, guessing, writing, drawing, using gestures and facial expressions, and occasional English words (García & Li, 2014). A similar protocol, found in the sample TA Time below, was also presented to the students in all three language programs to encourage them to leverage all communicative resources across modalities and to feel safe in the conversation with TAs and peers.

Table 2. *TA Time topics and tasks for Chinese and Japanese beginner-level language courses*

	Chinese	Japanese
TT 1	<p>All about names</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talk about Chinese name - Play with Chinese/English tongue twisters - Share one commonly used phrase among young generations in Chinese 	<p>Get to know each other better</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce yourself - Find out your peer's food preferences - React to the information just given using appropriate -verbal/non-verbal signs - Leave the person appropriately
TT 2	<p>Get to know each other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ask about TAs' Names - Get to know each other's dialect background - One commonly used phrase in greeting in Chinese 	<p>Ask someone for help</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ask a stranger to read a note written in Japanese - Ask a stranger to write a word in Japanese - Ask about Japanese characters to their peers
TT 3	<p>Where are you from?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talk about languages & area of study - Share one commonly used way to ask "where are you from" - Reflect on when and how to ask the question "where are you from" 	<p>Who is who on the photo?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bring a family photo or a photo of friends - Learn from each other about their family/friends - Describe things and people in a photo - Compliment someone or something in a photo

		- Respond to a compliment
TT 4	Roommates/friends/family	Sell what you don't need to someone
	- Talk about families using your own photo	- Negotiate for price for the item in a photo
	- Get to know your TA better	- Describe the item in a photo
TT 5	All about numbers	Make a group-travel plan
	- Talk about internet expressions with numbers	- Make a suggestion for a group trip
	- Share your favorite restaurants nearby	- Compare two travel plans
		- Make a group decision
TT 6	Favorite restaurants and scheduling	End-of-semester dinner plan
	- Bring a photo of your favorite restaurant and share some details	- Make a suggestion for an end-of-semester dinner
	- Schedule a TA time	- Compare two restaurants for a group dinner
		- Make a group decision
TT 7	Chinese music and movies	
	- Find out your TA's favorite singer/band/music in Chinese	
	- Find out your TA's recommended Chinese movies.	

Note. Abbreviation: TT, TA Time.

The following sample unit (<https://osf.io/pexhf>) from the Korean course (Week 8-9) was scheduled after the classroom lessons focused on describing the location of people or things. In this activity, students were expected to introduce their family or friends and describe where they live. They also learned about the family and friends of the group members. While engaged in the conversation, students and TAs collaboratively indicated the location of their families and friends on a map. This visual representation of the location of family members was an effective way of demonstrating how diverse their backgrounds were. Both TAs and students were encouraged to use the interactional resources they had learned through Pair-up Activities in their conversation.

Before the session, students were instructed to read the guidelines for the session and come prepared. The instructions for the TAs, which included preparing copies of a map of the world, the US, and Korea for the group to use, are also included in the shared sample unit. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes in a designated area in the department for small group discussions. After the session ended, both students and the TAs were required to report on their participation. Students narrated in a video or wrote about what they learned from interacting with others in the session. They were also encouraged to write about how the other two assignments, Pair-up Activities, and Discussion Forum, supported their performance and interactions in the TA Time session. TAs, on the other hand, wrote their responses to the prompts provided by the instructor, reflecting on their interactions with students in their sessions. The TA response journals, which were discussed with the instructor, were intended to help TAs become aware of how conversations are shaped and equip them with strategies to better support students in becoming more engaged with other participants.

Intervention # 3: Discussion Forum

The Discussion Forum is an activity designed to provide an alternative space other than a language learning environment to critically reflect on recurring issues such as language attitudes, variation, and ideologies and to raise sociolinguistic awareness and intercultural competence. Students are encouraged to use all language and multimodal resources to freely express their thoughts and discuss instances from their life histories and experiences. More specifically, the forum provides students opportunities to: (i) observe authentic multimodal materials and analyze critical instances within these materials (Principle 1, 3, 4); (ii) connect to the topic by sharing their own life experiences (Principle 2, 4, 6); and (iii) interact with their peers and build an open, reflective community beyond the language classroom (Principle 7). The topics ranged from language and identity, language and place, and language change to language- and/or culture-specific topics for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

Like other intervention components, we designed the Discussion Forum as an out-of-class assignment to be completed online through the course platform. Students need to post their responses to the prompts before being able to read and comment on their peers' posts. Throughout the semester, the Discussion Forum covers 5 to 6 different topics, each closely articulated with the content and language being taught in class. For example, all three languages feature a unit addressing the issues surrounding the "Where are you from?" question, typically introduced early in the semester. While many textbooks present the linguistic elements of this question and include it in sample dialogues, they often overlook the cultural contexts and the appropriateness of using this question in different situations. By providing videos and prompts on "when", "where", "to whom," and "how" to ask the question "where are you from," the Discussion Forum enables students to critically analyze the situations and reflect on their own life experiences. [Table 3](#) presents the Discussion Forum topics for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean classes. The three language classes share some common topics, with each language class including its culture-specific contents, and the order of the topics also varies by language course.

Table 3. *Discussion Forum topics for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean beginner-level language Courses*

	Chinese	Japanese	Korean
DF 1	<p>Dialects and Accents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examination of stereotypes of dialects and accents in one's own language and in Chinese - Awareness of language variations - Attitude towards language learner accents 	<p>Identity and Names</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bias and attitude embedded in 'where are you from' questions and responses - Intercultural sensitivity and names 	<p>Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bias and attitude embedded in 'where are you from' questions and responses
DF 2	<p>Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bias and attitude embedded in 'where are you from' questions and responses 	<p>Dialects and Accents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examination of stereotypes of dialects and accents in one's own language and in Japanese - Awareness of language variations - Attitude towards language 	<p>Language Change and Young people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of and attitude to language change - Language use by younger generations in one's own culture and in Korean culture

		learner accents	
DF 3	Identity and Stereotypes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bias and stereotypes towards Chinese language and culture - Reflection and share experiences on bias and stereotypes towards their own language and culture 	Intercultural Politeness 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modesty in response to compliments 	Name and Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bias around naming culture - Name-based assumptions and stereotypes - Intercultural sensitivity and names
DF 4	Critical Instances in Intercultural Encounters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of cross cultural misunderstanding - Management of miscommunications and conflicts caused in different values towards privacy 	Language Change and Loanwords <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orthographic representation of proper names - Origin and use of loanwords - Abbreviations of loanwords 	Critical Instances in Intercultural Encounters <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Management of miscommunication and conflicts caused in intercultural situations - Awareness of power embedded in language use in a conflict
DF 5	Language Change and Internet Slang <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Awareness of language change and variation in digital context -Reflect on the need of learning a 'standard' language versus learning language variations 	Intercultural Politeness 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of indirectness in refusal - Intercultural sensitivity in compromising 	Dialects and Accents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examination of stereotypes of dialects and accents in one's own language and Korean - Awareness of language variations - Attitude towards language learner accents
DF 6	Language Change Handwriting or Typing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attitudes towards writing Chinese characters -Awareness of language change and variation in digital and global context 		

Note. Abbreviation: DF, Discussion Forum.

The sample unit (<https://osf.io/xmrpq>) from the Japanese course was designed to help students recognize the fact that there are variations within the same language and critically reflect on the biases they may have towards certain accents/dialects and can become accepting of variations in languages. The questions on this topic were posted online, where students left their opinions and experiences and corresponded to other students' posts. A video clip featuring several Japanese dialects was included to help students better understand the Discussion Forum topic and the language phenomenon of interest. After completing the

assignment, the instructor discussed the Discussion Forum assignment in class.

Analysis of reflections by students, TAs, and instructors

We asked students to write a journal about the three intervention activities or any aspect of their learning progress and asked the TAs to submit their reports throughout the semester. As instructors commented on students' journal entries, they were reminded to observe students' holistic growth and empowerment facilitated by language learning. The instructors also wrote their reflections in the shared Google Doc in reflection of the intervention. We collected journal entries from the students (552 entries in total), reflection journals from the TAs (80 entries in total), and instructor journals (25,835 words in total). The following sections present an analysis of reflections from the instructors, TAs, and students from the courses where the intervention was implemented.

Reflections on Pair-up Activities

In their journal entries mentioned above, many students expressed that by observing and analyzing authentic conversations in the Pair-up Activities, they understood how conversation works in real life and developed more natural conversation skills applicable to day-to-day interactions. Student VL reported, "I feel more comfortable asking questions and clarifying." Student EW noted, "Pair-up Activity was helpful for allowing me to incorporate more reactive tokens into my conversations." Students emphasized the value of learning the language in collaboration with another student, contrasting this with traditional classroom teacher-student interactions. Student AP reported that it was "fun to cooperate with another student to decipher what the videos were saying. Working together is useful because one of us could notice a different tone or interpret the body language differently." Students also enjoyed watching each other's recorded videos through VoiceThread and provided constructive feedback on their peers' performance. Overall, students were very positive towards the Pair-up Activities because of the casual and collaborative nature of the assignment.

Instructors also offered their perspectives on students' reactions to the Pair-up Activities. Prior to the first session, some instructors expressed concerns about the potential challenges of explaining the activity, as Instructor A noted. Despite these concerns, introducing the Pair-up Activities was smooth and efficient. Following the initial sessions, Instructor A noted that although some pairs did not use all the target elements, the overall dialogues were "good and interesting." Instructor D echoed these comments, praising the activity's effectiveness, as all students were proactively engaged and showcased their creativity by developing their own real-life dialogues. Additionally, Instructor A highlighted that the Pair-up Activities provided a more relaxed setting promoting peer learning. Although finding authentic materials was highly time-consuming, instructors noticed that students enjoyed the video materials very much and applied the interactional resources learned from the videos in classroom interactions. Instructor J mentioned that students "were able to help each other to make the conversation go smoothly by using conversational strategies." The positive experience of navigating students through varied social situations also led some instructors to reconsider other written work and tests, making them more task-oriented and reflective of various real-life situations.

Nevertheless, students were less adept at employing the conversational strategies introduced in the Pair-up Activities, often resorting to a more mechanical application compared to the more natural use in their self-produced videos or classroom practices. Instructor A also reflected that students would "benefit from more direct instructions as well as on-the-spot feedback in the classroom" for the Pair-up Activities.

Reflections on TA Time

According to their journal entries, many students from the three courses found the TA Time to be an effective place to engage in authentic conversations, or in Student AD's words, a place for "an actual real, non-scripted conversation in real life." Instructors also recognized that the TA Time served as a safe space where students could freely leverage all semiotic and other interactional features available to them. For

example, Student QJ stated that he often “found [himself] pointing to things and using hand gestures” for communication. Having non-native TAs involved in Japanese sections also created an encouraging learning environment. Student MP stated that “[TAs] are ...students, ... [who] also went through the same process we are going through right now, [which] makes us relate easily.” The TA Time further contributed to building a learner community where students from diverse backgrounds form positive human relationships, use the TL, and continue the learning journey together. Student EQ felt that “[TA Time is] ... helping me socially,” and Student LH stated that “[TA Time...] builds connections with peers.” Student SL also noted, “[TA Time...] heightened my curiosity towards others.” In areas without a community where the TL is spoken, the TA Time can serve as an ideal alternative to satisfy one of the 5Cs of WRSLL⁴, “Community.” TA reports also clearly demonstrated TAs’ enjoyment in connecting with peer language learners and a sense of belonging as participants of the learner community, rather than mere helpers. This was evidenced by some TA Time sessions that extended beyond the assigned time and location to real-life spaces, such as cooking or visiting local restaurants together as friends.

Instructors’ overall feedback to the TA Time was also exceptionally favorable, particularly pointing out how the TA Time served as a catalyst for collaborative learning in other parts of the course. Instructor D shared, “This comradery [through TA Time] translated into a supportive and relaxed classroom atmosphere, where students collaborated and felt free to participate in class discussions.” She expressed her strong desire to continue with the TA Time intervention in all her classes in the future, a reflection echoed by other instructors.

However, it was noticed that some TAs still attempted to explicitly teach grammar and correct students’ mistakes during TA Time instead of focusing on interacting with students. It may be because their idea of language learning is based on teaching grammar and vocabulary, which they themselves may have experienced in a traditional foreign language classroom. Some TAs reported that having the TA sessions at the beginning phase of the course was challenging because students were linguistically quite limited, although they have noticed students’ improvement in using both communicative and interactional resources over the course of the semester. Therefore, it is important to share our ICC-oriented teaching goals and methodologies with TAs and provide them with appropriate training—such as a workshop on Conversation Analysis of real conversations in the TL—before they start taking their roles.

Reflections on the Discussion Forum

Some students found the Discussion Forum to be a valuable space to share their views about intercultural communication. The Discussion Forum provided them with an opportunity to learn how to “handle intercultural situations” (Student EW) and made them “question part of language and interactions that [they] would often overlook,” allowing them to “gain a better understanding of other perspectives from different people” (Student DL). Student LW indicated that the Discussion Forum provided a precious opportunity for collaborative learning: “When I read my classmates’ threads, it really expands my views of certain topics from different perspectives. I enjoy reading my classmates’ threads, there are many takeaways.” The Discussion Forum also led students to reflect on their language learning process. Student RH from the Japanese class reported: “I think it provides a larger picture view of learning Japanese and gives us good opportunities to reflect on our progress.” However, compared to the Pair-up Activities and the TA Time, students provided less feedback and insights on their experiences with the Discussion Forum, possibly because they focused more on aspects of their language-related skills rather than perspective changes when documenting their reflections.

While instructors generally found the Discussion Forum useful for “soliciting students’ thoughtful and varying opinions” and “enjoyable to learn different perspectives,” as noted by Instructor D, most instructors found it highly time-consuming to read all students’ posts and give individualized, meaningful feedback in addition to other teaching responsibilities.

⁴ World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (www.actfl.org)

Additionally, some instructors found it difficult to grade their posts. This indicates that, as we are trying to move away from prescribing a monolithic view of language and culture, we should also refrain from judging students' views on intercultural communication using our own subjectivities.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this report, we have presented the development and implementation of an intercultural engagement intervention across first-semester Chinese, Japanese, and Korean courses. Qualitative analyses of journal entries from students, TAs, and instructors indicate the intervention's effectiveness in creating a supportive and interactive environment (Principle 2, 7) for developing interactional competence with authentic materials and purposeful tasks (Principle 3, 5) and critically navigating language-related socio-cultural issues (Principle 2, 4, 6). Central to all these facets is Principle 1, which positions the language learner as both a participant user and a learner/analyzer. This fundamental principle fosters learners' meta-awareness of the interplay between language and culture (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010) in their intercultural interactions, serving as the foundation for our intercultural approach in language teaching. In the discussions on linguistic diversity, this approach helped learners revisit their identities, many of whom are Asian descendants and heritage learners, reinforcing the notion that Asian culture is not merely an external addition but an integral part of the multilingual and multicultural American society.

The intervention project also allowed researchers and instructors to gain a deeper and more holistic understanding of ICC in the context of language teaching, allowing us to critically reflect on our own teaching practices and philosophies. The project specifically prompted us to rethink how we assess students' ICC. When an instructor questioned the way of grading discussion posts, we recognized the need to avoid subjective judgments and the imposition of a singular view of language and culture. As a result, we opted to grade based on completion and participation, applying this assessment approach to Pair-up Activities and TA Time. However, assessing ICC still remains complex, as it involves fluid, multifaceted processes that resist standardization (Scarino, 2010). Inspired by Scarino, we propose to incorporate self-driven or progress-focused assessments, such as portfolios, which can better capture the ongoing growth and diverse competencies of our students in intercultural communications.

Collaboration among the three programs was efficient, reducing duplicative efforts and maximizing synergies because these three Asian languages share many common sociocultural norms, such as modesty in response to compliments. However, the three Asian languages also diverge in some respects, which requires special support. For example, the use of honorifics and speech levels in Japanese and Korean were integrated into the Pair-up Activities and TA Time with adequate lessons and support in regular classes. TA Time #3 in Japanese includes a task called "Who is Who in the Photo." Before assigning this task, we taught respectful and humble forms used when addressing parents, depending on whose parents are being referred. Additionally, issues related to handwriting or typing Chinese characters are discussed from a sociolinguistic perspective in the Discussion Forum.

The use of authentic materials was important, but finding useful segments with the features that suited our instructional purposes was not easy. We learned to encourage instructors to identify segments that can be used for their teaching objectives while watching media. We also recommend using advanced YouTube video searching tools (e.g., <https://filmot.com/>) and collaborating with students in the process of collecting a variety of videos, as many of them already spend a considerable amount of time engaging with media from the target culture (Hwang et al., 2024).

Lastly, the concepts and format of these interventions can be applied to any language while also accommodating specific language and cultural features. Although initially applied to Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, the principles and the design of the interventions could be generalized to a broader group of languages, including those from more distantly related families such as Germanic, Semitic, or Romance. This adaptability makes the approach applicable to a wide range of language learning contexts, fostering both language and culture-specific aspects and broader intercultural communicative competence.

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