Research Paper

# Intercultural Learning about Cultural Concepts Using English as a Lingua Franca: Online Exchanges Between German and Japanese University Students

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## Abstract

Intercultural interaction between university students of two different speech communities (i.e., different native languages: German/Japanese) was central to this practitioner research project, which involved two semester-long online exchanges using English as a common foreign language. The students were researching emic Japanese cultural concepts, and the authors, as teachers, conducted systematic evaluations of the seminars (a total of 130 students). The authors discuss the results of their evaluations regarding intercultural learning. Students' reflections on this international classroom collaboration suggest that although English as a lingua franca is not bound to any specific culture, it can be successfully used in classrooms to initiate intercultural learning concerning particular cultures.


[Keywords]　cultural linguistics, emic concepts, online intercultural exchanges, interculturality

## Introduction

Universities worldwide have been implementing strategies to strengthen international collaborations and networks in recent years. Strategies of internationalization also include university students who would ideally acquire intercultural competencies relevant to succeeding in the era of globalization. From the perspective of culture, however, internationalization is ambivalent because the extensive use of the English language in verbal and written discourses—which makes international communication initially possible—seems to lead to global cultural homogenization and a loss of cultural variety (Trabant, 2014).

As researchers and teachers of educational studies at two large research universities engaged in international collaborations, we tried to address this ambivalence in two seminars through classroom

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practitioner research. The authors (a doctoral-trained German educational anthropologist based in Germany and a doctoral-trained social/cultural psychologist US American based in Japan) held two "joint seminars" via online collaboration in the spring semesters of 2017 and 2018.

We organized online communication between our students, which was held in English but whose content focused mainly on emic (Pike, 1967), Japanese cultural concepts, and also German topics. Whereas most online intercultural exchanges involve simple language exchanges to practice a foreign language or the exchange of information about particular cultural customs, greetings, food, or holidays (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016), we based our exchanges on one of the premises of cultural-linguistic theory (Sharifian, 2017); namely, translating emic (Japanese) cultural conceptualizations whose meanings were mediated through English in online discussions in small groups of two or three students in each country (totaling 130 students).

This paper will reflect upon our investigation of these "joint seminars" in terms of intercultural learning, highlighting possibilities and the limits of such an international classroom research exchange endeavor, thereby theoretically and empirically contributing to the field of intercultural education through online interactions.

We argue that our students underwent intercultural learning processes and acquired intercultural competencies as evidenced by their reflections and written outcomes through the international interactions made possible by the seminars. We thus propose that the evidence from these two online exchanges of German/Japanese classroom participants can contribute to the literature on cultural learning through social interaction by demonstrating that English can be used as a lingua franca to initiate intercultural interactions leading to intercultural competencies. Our seminar, therefore, proposes a way to mediate between global cultural homogenization (through the use of English as a lingua franca) and simultaneous recognition of cultural diversity (by focusing on emic concepts of culture).

We will first introduce the central theoretical concepts we use to analyze the seminars, then outline the methodology of the two seminars. Finally, we present the data collected in the collaborative research project and analyze it in terms of intercultural competence to verify our assertions.

## Theoretical background

### Intercultural Pedagogy, Intercultural Competencies, and Emic Cultural Concepts

The importance of intercultural pedagogy in the era of globalization has often been emphasized (e.g., Nohl, 2010). Such pedagogy aims to provide students with the necessary competencies and global consciousness (Dill, 2013). Concepts of intercultural pedagogy and intercultural learning (e.g., Nohl, 2010; Wulf, 2009) start from the observation that individuals grow up in particular cultural environments, including, among others, language, customs, and values, and thereby acquire specific patterns of thought and practice.

Because of processes of habitualization, the individual tends to miss the particularity of their cultural environment and its patterns of thought and practice. The individual may become aware of this particularity by encountering another culture: such as through reading about foreign customs,

talking to foreigners, or traveling to other countries. In addition, intercultural training programs are designed to teach sojourners how to behave, act, and feel when interacting with the “other” cultural members (Dalsky & Landis, 2004; 2013).

The experience of encountering another culture can elicit different reactions, ranging from anxiety and resistance to interest and the ambition to learn more about the other culture. Intercultural training aims to stimulate learners to overcome fears and feelings of resistance and promote an open attitude toward other cultures. Intercultural training shall thereby help overcome forms of discrimination and enable people of different cultural backgrounds to participate equally within countries (mainly when these are characterized by a wide variety of cultural groups, for example, through migration processes) and in a globalizing world. Such training often lets the students make intercultural experiences, ranging from foreign language learning to traveling to other countries and meeting and cooperating with foreign people (see Landis & Bhawuk, 2000). In our seminar, we used online interviews between students from two different countries as a medium of intercultural training.

In our seminars, the German students interviewed their Japanese counterparts about Japanese emic concepts. The term *emic cultural concept* refers to the assumption that (national) languages contain words that can hardly—or impossibly—be translated into other languages. To take a word we used in our seminars as an example, the Japanese word 甘え (*amae*) has been described as having no direct equivalent in other languages. Translations such as “dependence” or “indulgence” do not hit the mark, nor do they hint at the cultural significance of *amae* (Doi, 1971/1981). Usually, people use such emic cultural concepts without reflecting on them analytically.

If asked to explain such concepts to a member of a different speech community, people would refer to their everyday understanding (i.e., commonsense), which we call *folk psychology*, with reference to Bruner (1990). It is precisely this everyday talk about people’s thoughts, feelings, and practices in terms of emic cultural concepts that we asked our students to consider.

However, we do not claim that emic cultural concepts are an “original” or “essential” feature of any culture. If the concept does not seem to exist in a particular culture literally, likely the phenomenon would at least manifest itself universally. For example, although *amae* may be a specific emic Japanese concept, it may be investigated universally and has indeed been found to emerge as the manifestation of an analogous emotion outside of Japan (Niiya et al., 2006).

### English as Lingua Franca

According to linguistic anthropology, language and culture are closely bound (Bruner, 1990; Rossa, 2018; Trabant, 2012). Therefore, learning another language should imply learning about the respective culture. Although this statement may be true in a general sense, it becomes questionable when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Today, the English language functions as a language in culturally embedded speech communities such as Great Britain or the Unites States and as a lingua franca in international contexts (Jenkins et al., 2018; Kerschen, 2018; Sedlhofer, 2011). In fact, many governments’ emphasis on teaching English as a foreign language in schools seems to be directed more on supporting the youth’s global competencies. In Japan, the Ministry of Education recently emphasizes speaking with other students and native-language Assistant Language Teachers

(ALTs) to prepare for higher education (Underwood & Glasgow, 2018).

English can be viewed as today's primary intercultural language because it is the most chosen means of communication that transcends national and cultural boundaries. Therefore, we address the following research question: How can the use of English contribute to intercultural learning that does not relate to a culture associated with the English language itself? In this article, we set out to do classroom practitioner research with a novel methodology: online intercultural exchanges involving "joint seminars" featuring (Japanese) emic cultural concepts.

## Method

The primary purpose of this paper is to assess the intercultural learning of our students. To better understand intercultural learning, the concept of "intercultural competence" is helpful. Following Rossa (2018), who proposes a method for assessing intercultural competence based on Byram (2012), we distinguish five factors for defining intercultural competence: 1) *attitudes* (openness towards experiencing the foreign culture and readiness to suspend stereotypes about the other culture); 2) *knowledge* (about specific features of the other culture); 3) *skills of interpreting and relating* (understanding cultural differences and relating the other culture to one's own); 4) *skills of discovery and interaction* (being able to recognize yet unknown patterns of practice and meaning in different cultures through active involvement with members of other cultures); and 5) *critical cultural awareness* (being able to reflect upon the different cultural values through comparison critically).

At the end of our seminars, we asked our students to complete questionnaires designed to evaluate the seminars differently. The questionnaire comprised of three sections, the first one included 12 items such as "I enjoyed the international project," "I learned about the other culture," or "I developed my English-speaking skills," where the students were asked to indicate their response on a Likert scale of 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). The students were asked to choose three items from the first section and comment freely in the second section. In the third section, students were asked, "How could we improve this international project? (Please write freely below.)" in the third section.

To assess intercultural competence, we screened the filled-out questionnaires about open statements that relate to the items "I learned about the other culture" and "I learned about intercultural interaction." We interpreted these statements with theoretical considerations on intercultural learning, particularly the five factors of intercultural competence. Additionally, we discussed some questionnaire statements related to the items "My English reading skills improved" and "My English-speaking skills improved" because they also proved relevant to intercultural learning. Therefore, we do not attempt to measure intercultural competence in terms of degrees but rather to interpret students' statements systematically regarding the above five factors regarding intercultural competence.

## The Present Joint-Classroom Research

### Description of the International Joint-Seminars

In both semesters of the online exchanges, the German author held a qualitative research methods seminar in a Master's program in educational studies at a large research university in Germany. At the same time, the American author held an academic English writing-listening class in the Liberal Arts and Sciences general education program at a large research university in Japan for first-year students. Although the purposes of the seminars in Germany and Japan were different, the seminars were made to be compatible by focusing on culturally specific Japanese emic cultural concepts. Specifically, the task of the Japanese students was to discuss, reflect upon, and write about emic Japanese cultural concepts in the English language, whereas the task of German students was to apply methods of qualitative social research for understanding Japanese cultural concepts, also in English. Japanese and German students interacted online to conduct interviews according to principles of social research, in which the German students tried to understand the meanings of emic Japanese cultural concepts.

Therefore, the students' (German/Japanese) task was to interact virtually using online tools and applications about Japanese culturally-embedded concepts using an intercultural means of communication (English). In both semesters, the students of both seminars were asked to form groups of two or three students to complete the tasks. For the German students, the seminar included writing a research report of around 20 pages at the end of the semester, in which they presented the results of their respective research projects. The Japanese students' tasks were to write paragraphs on the emic Japanese concepts and a more extended reflection essay about the exchanges at the end of the academic term in English.

### Practitioner Research

With our guidance, the students were responsible for the following tasks: 1) researching teacher-selected emic Japanese cultural concepts for pre-understandings; 2) formulating research questions regarding the emic cultural concepts; 3) engaging in intercultural exchanges about the concepts; and 4) reflecting upon the intercultural exchanges, which may lead to further research questions.

We call our approach "practitioner research" because, in our seminars, research and practice are closely connected in the following regard: the German students practiced qualitative research; the Japanese students practiced research about Japanese emic cultural concepts, and the teachers conducted research in terms of systematic evaluations of their educational practice.

### Germany-Japan Online Intercultural Exchange I

In the spring semester of 2017, 60 students participated in the seminars: 20 students in Germany and 40 in Japan. The German teacher asked the participants in his seminar to research specific cultural aspects of education in Japan as expressed in the following 15 concepts:

To be sure, these concepts are quite different in kind; for example, *wa* (和) is a rather traditional key Japanese concept, and Japanese culture and mentality have often been described in terms of

**Table 1.**

| Japanese concepts | Romaji (Japanese) | English translation |
|---|---|---|
| 挨拶 | aisatsu | greetings |
| 甘え | amae | presumed indulgence |
| いじめ | ijime | bullying |
| 先輩･後輩 | senpai / kouhai | senior / junior |
| 入学試験 | nyugakushiken | entrance examination |
| サークル | sakuru | circle (club activity group) |
| クリスマス | kurisumasu | Christmas |
| 卒業式 | sotsugyoshiki | graduation ceremony |
| 集団意識 | shyudanishiki | group consciousness |
| 和 | wa | harmony |
| 沈黙 | chinmoku | silence |
| 面子 | mentsu | face, honor |
| 武士道 | bushido | samurai code of chivalry |
| 本音･建前 | honne / tatemae | true feelings / official stance |
| 義理･恩 | giri / on | sense of duty / obligation |

*harmony*, which is expressed by this concept (Dalsky & Su, 2020). In contrast, *kurisumasu* (クリスマス) is a relatively modern and, in fact, Western concept because it is the Japanized version of "Christmas." Yet, In Germany, Christmas is celebrated very differently, and we wanted our students to inquire about such differences. Moreover, some concepts refer to psychological meanings, others to social practices. This variety of concepts was systematically intended because we did not know in advance which kind of words would be most suitable for the seminars.

### Procedure: Germany-Japan Online Intercultural Exchange I

The students were divided into smaller groups of two or three students, and each group chose three concepts out of the pool of 15. These groups then began researching the meanings of these concepts in the existing academic literature and Internet sources to gain a pre-understanding. Moreover, the German class was acquainted with the literature on qualitative methods in social research (e.g., Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The teachers assigned the small groups of the Japanese class to the small groups of the German course using email addresses on a shared Google Doc so that fixed assignments were made with small groups that shared the same emic cultural concepts. The German students were first asked to email their Japanese teammates with self-introductions, and dates and times for the online exchanges that were to take place.

The German students formulated specific interview questions to ask the Japanese based on systematic interviewing considerations. The participants of the Japanese class prepared for the online meetings by writing paragraphs on the same emic Japanese cultural concepts as their German counterparts to prepare for the interviews with the Germans in English relating to the concepts and possible German translations.

Finally, outside of class time, the students arranged to meet using telecommunication web-based applications for smartphones, tablets, and computers such as Skype, LINE, Google Hangouts, and WhatsApp (tools like Zoom or Webex were not yet available at that time). The interviews were held in English. The students of the German seminar were asked to transcribe the interviews and write a paper in German based on analyses according to standards in qualitative research (i.e., coding and categorizing). The Japanese students were asked to reflect upon their experience of using academic English in an authentic intercultural situation by writing reflection essays about their experience in English.

At the end of the semester, a group discussion was conducted. A questionnaire was completed by the participants of both classes—however, it was not mandatory—to evaluate this novel form of international online academic teaching and learning. Most of the participants consented to have their reflections shared anonymously. In the German class, nine students completed the questionnaires; in the Japanese class, 31 questionnaires were completed.

**Project Evaluation (Results): Germany-Japan Online Intercultural Exchange I**

In this section, we report only the suggestions made by our students to improve the seminar insofar as we changed the second seminar based on these suggestions. Whereas the project was evaluated positively across all questionnaires, participants frequently suggested using fewer cultural concepts in future international exchange seminars. For example, to improve the seminar, a German student suggested:

> "Fewer concepts, which can then be condensed in many overlaps through the different interviews by the seminar participants."

This is a rather systematic methodological suggestion. Indeed, each group had chosen three concepts out of fifteen, so there was little overlap between the interviews of the different groups. Therefore, for their final research papers, German students could mostly rely only upon their own interview material—which was not, in every case, very rich.

Although for other reasons, a similar suggestion was brought up from the Japanese side. A Japanese student wrote:

> "This time, we talked about three topics. But it was very hard. So, it will be good to choose one topic to talk about."

In addition, some Japanese participants felt the international seminar was not an exchange; they wanted to learn more specifically about German cultural concepts. This may explain why 26% of the Japanese students checked "Neutral" regarding the item "I learned about the other culture" (while the others checked either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"). As a Japanese student wrote:

> "Japanese people and German people should talk about Japanese words and German words."

These suggestions were also discussed in the oral feedback rounds of both seminars, so we decided to implement them in the next course of intercultural exchanges.

### Procedure: Germany-Japan Online Intercultural Exchange II

We followed up the first online international exchange with another one in the subsequent spring semester to address the students' feedback. In this second exchange, following the students' suggestions, we focused on one critical emic Japanese cultural conceptualization (甘え: *amae*). *Amae* was chosen because there is a relative abundance of academic materials written in English, German, and Japanese about the concept—in contrast to other emic Japanese cultural concepts we proposed in the year before—which suggest that *amae* may be a key cultural concept for understanding the Japanese (e.g., Dalsky & Su, 2020; Doi, 1971/1981; Yamaguchi & Ariizumi, 2006). This time, the German seminar (in the same study course) had 30 graduate students. They collaborated online with two undergraduate academic English writing-listening classes (in the same study course) at the same research university in Japan, with 40 Japanese students.

Like Exchange I, Exchange II targeted different goals for the other classes. Again, the purpose of the German course was to interview Japanese students to gain insights into one Japanese emic concept according to the principles of qualitative social research. The goal of the Japanese class was to practice and improve English academic skills in an authentic intercultural online environment, to share their written accounts of *amae*, and to question the German seminar members about particular German cultural characteristics such as types of food, customs, famous places, or events such as Octoberfest (there was little information about German emic concepts in the literature in English that Japanese students could understand) that the Japanese students researched in advance (in groups of two or three students). Again, academic term papers and final reflections based on a questionnaire (similar to the questionnaire of Exchange I) were the outcome measures for both classes.

### Project Evaluation (Results): Germany-Japan Online Intercultural Exchange II

This section reports and interprets the main results of the questionnaire statements concerning intercultural competence. Our analysis is based on the five aspects of intercultural competence presented above (Byram, 2012; Rossa, 2018) to qualify specific patterns of our students' experiences. We discuss German and Japanese students separately because significant differences between the views of the Germans and the Japanese can be found. We take statements from both years in this section because the first and second seminar statements do not differ significantly in qualitative terms. We obtained informed consent to anonymously share the results of the students' surveys. Generally, the participants praised the joint seminars encouragingly; participants strongly agreed that they enjoyed the international project and learned about the other culture.

### Intercultural Competence: German Students' Comments

The students were asked to write open statements, which resulted in short texts that often refer to more than only one of the five factors of intercultural competence. For example, a German student commented:

> “I learned about the other culture because the Japanese way of life and thinking is very different from ours and it was very interesting to learn more about their values.”

This statement expresses an experience of cultural difference; simultaneously, the statement evaluates this experience positively. In expressing an interest to learn about Japanese “values,” the statement moreover, implies that the student is open to acknowledging cultural diversity in itself. This learning is not about cultural differences in daily tasks but rather about reflecting on different cultural worldviews, as the word “values” indicates.

With regard to the scheme of intercultural competence, this statement suggests that the student displayed the following: 1) an *attitude* for intercultural learning; 2) acquired intercultural *knowledge* (about different “values”); 3) the *skill of interpreting* the other culture and *relating* it to their own culture; and 4) the *skill of discovery and interaction* is also implicit in this statement, because the student discovered “more” about Japanese culture through online interaction. However, *critical cultural awareness* is not to be found in this statement. As the following comments demonstrate, this pattern permeates all the statements of the German students.

One German student reported evidence for the importance of communication and interviewing for learning about another culture:

> “I found it very exciting to get an insight into Japanese culture through the communication and the interview. By directly speaking to Japanese, cultural differences and particularities became much clearer than through just reading. Moreover, I think that by using this method actively what I have learned will stick better in my memory.”

Again, an intercultural *attitude* is apparent. Also, the *skill of discovery and interaction* is displayed. The *skill of interpreting and relating* can be inferred from this statement as the student became aware of “cultural differences and particularities.” Mentioning “particularities” also hints that the student acquired intercultural *knowledge*. However, again, *critical cultural awareness* cannot be inferred from this statement.

Moreover, this statement distinguishes between different forms of intercultural learning: “just reading”—with which the students started their project—about the other culture would be a way to learn. Still, this way is evaluated much lower than the “direct” “communication” through interviewing. We may add that online communication still is much less “direct” than a face-to-face encounter that would also entail bodily participation in a foreign cultural environment. However, the student making this distinction shows that they have learned to distinguish different forms of intercultural learning and that online exchanges are a more direct form of learning than “just reading.”

Finally, one of the German students reported that the intercultural learning did not end with the project but continued. In this case, a new international friendship emerged. Here, we find a particular intercultural *skill of interaction*:

> “I learned about intercultural interaction, and the contact to one of my interview partners is

still actual. We still communicate over LINE."

The questionnaire also included items concerning the English language. Some of these comments add to the understanding of intercultural learning processes in the seminar, so we take a closer look at these. German students tended to report that their English reading skills improved because of the necessity to read English literature in the course ("Agree": 7; "Neutral": 6; "Disagree": 1).

"My English reading skills improved because of the English literature."

However, concerning the English-speaking skills, the German students' view was different ("Agree": 4; "Neutral": 6; "Disagree": 3; "Strongly Disagree": 1). One student commented:

"My English-speaking skills didn't improve because the used level for speaking was low compared to the level needed with for example native speakers."

This statement must be read in the context of using English as a common second language. In this context, none of the speakers can be seen as a model to learn to improve verbal skills. Several German students complained about the low proficiency of their Japanese counterparts in the English language. This experience could have been an opportunity to learn that even English as a *lingua franca* is learned and used differently in other countries. However, such a process of intercultural learning that would be termed as the *skill of interpreting and relating* is not indicated in any comment of the German students.

However, one German student reported that using English for communication was a significant challenge:

"I don't like to talk to strangers because I am shy and it makes me feel uncomfortable (especially in a different language), but it was important to get out of my "comfort zone" and in the end it wasn't as bad as I thought before, actually it was really nice."

This statement indicates that the student needed to overcome her-/himself to conduct the interviews in English. However, this self-conquest did not lead to a learning process concerning the other culture but to the good feeling of having successfully mastered a personal challenge ("really nice"). This statement, therefore, relates to the intercultural *skill of interaction*.

Summing up, the view of the German students indicates processes of intercultural learning, whereby this learning refers to Japanese culture. The English language appears as a communicative tool for mediating this learning process but tends to be described as a relatively poor tool, mainly because the Japanese counterparts were seen as having no proper speaking /listening command of it.

In terms of intercultural competence, we can infer four of the mentioned five aspects of intercultural competence from the students' comments: attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction. Critical cultural awareness, however, was not found. It is

impossible to determine whether the students acquired the analyzed intercultural *attitude* through the seminar and to which degree they entered the seminar with this very attitude; also, we cannot say whether they improved their intercultural skills through the seminar. However, we can say that they fostered their intercultural attitude and practiced their intercultural skills. And we can indeed say that the students acquired knowledge about the other culture through the seminar.

**Intercultural Competence: Japanese students' comments**

The statements of the Japanese students reflect a somewhat different pattern than their German counterparts about intercultural competence. One Japanese student commented on personal feelings and thoughts regarding the intercultural experience reflecting difficulties that emerged in the online exchange:

> "I was surprised at German's questions because they don't understand "amae" at all. I realized "amae" is a unique Japanese expression. It was interesting that there are a lot of differences between Japan and other countries."

This statement expresses an intercultural learning process that stretches in two directions. On the one hand, the student learned about Germans, the other culture; however, this learning was somewhat indirect because what the student learned about Germans was triggered by the questions they asked about the Japanese concept *amae*. On the other hand, their questions stimulated a cultural self-reflection of the student so that they, most of all, seemed to have gained a new insight into their own culture. Therefore, through the intercultural experience, the student learns about the other culture and their own, which is often described as an essential feature of intercultural learning (e.g., Wulf, 2009).

In terms of intercultural competence, this Japanese student's statement demonstrates the following four features: an open *attitude* towards intercultural experiences ("interesting"); *knowledge* through the fact that this student realized that their German counterpart seemed to know nothing about *amae*; *skills of interpreting and relating* insofar as the Japanese student expressed an understanding of a critical cultural difference by relating it to their own (Japanese) understanding of *amae*. Moreover, through active involvement with the Germans, the Japanese student made a *discovery.*

A similar pattern can be found in another Japanese student's comment on their limited contact with foreigners:

> "I am so happy that I could learn a lot about Germany. I have never talked with foreign people, so this is a wonderful experience."

Indeed, as Japan is an archipelago relatively recently opened up to the world, today, even young Japanese often need more motivation and limited opportunities to interact with non-Japanese (Dalsky & Su, 2020). Despite this, because of this intercultural communication activity, in terms of intercultural competence, this student expressed gaining *knowledge* about features of German

culture. Moreover, they expressed the *attitude* of feeling happy about this "wonderful experience." Finally, this quote demonstrates the *skill of intercultural interaction and discovery* because the student stated, "I have never talked with foreign people."

Another student suggested:

> "Before we undertake this project, we should learn [English] speaking and writing skills because we first year students have not learned enough at high school."

However, in the present endeavor, some of the students' comments suggest that they improved their English:

> "I was poor at speaking English, but after working with Skype, I became able to express easily in English what I want to say."

This statement can be interpreted in terms of *skills of intercultural interaction* that the student thinks they acquired through the seminar.

In sum, the Japanese students showed similar intercultural competencies concerning learning about the other culture as the German ones. Here, attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction could be found. Moreover, despite the similar pattern, it seems that concerning the craft of interpreting and relating, there is a difference between the German and the Japanese students: The Germans very much focused on learning about Japanese culture, that is, the foreign culture. The Japanese students, for their part, seem to also focus on learning about Japanese culture, remarkably. However, the Japanese students' statements concerning the English language differ from the German ones in that they realized their deficiency which they evaluated quite critically. Here, the Japanese students developed *critical cultural awareness* regarding their command of the English language and the Japanese English learning system.

## Discussion

### Critical Cultural Awareness

Both authors designed their respective classes so that, on the one hand, the curricular aims were met. On the other hand, the classes opened up a research opportunity for an intercultural exchange that was not a part of the official curriculum. This opportunity was generally based upon reflections on emic concepts of Japanese culture (with the second round also including aspects related to Germany). While the students themselves certainly reported having undergone intercultural experiences and learning processes (as evidenced above); here, we shall discuss the factor *critical cultural awareness* of Byram's (2012) scheme of intercultural competence.

One explanation for the lack of critical cultural awareness in our students' responses might be that critical cultural awareness might be challenging to accomplish in an online exchange as we have conducted. Critical reflection might be very much triggered by concrete interaction and experiences.

That is; for example, people meeting in concrete situations may directly feel that they behave more politely than they are used to but that the food that is served is less sophisticated than to which they are accustomed. The only aspect where critical cultural awareness was evident was the Japanese students' concrete experience of failing to use English. If this explanation should prove to be correct, then one should not expect too much critical cultural awareness through online exchanges. Another explanation is also related to the English language. It might be that the students did not gain knowledge about the other culture deep enough to enter into critical reflections because of the reported difficulties of communicating in English.

Considering these reflections, in the design of similar courses in the future, one may try to keep an eye on the factor of critical cultural awareness and find ways to elicit well-informed critical intercultural reflections from the students.

### The Role of the English Language

Still, it is necessary to question the role of the English language in this intercultural exchange. The culture focused upon was the Japanese and the German, not an "English culture." This means that the English language was not used to represent any "English culture"—whatever this would mean. Instead, English was used as a third language, making the intercultural exchange possible because the Japanese students did not speak German and vice versa. From one perspective then, it could be claimed that the English language was used "cultureless"; in other words, free from any cultural context. From another perspective, one could argue that the English language, used as a lingua franca, still represented a cultural context, although this is not a national context. In fact, English as a lingua franca represents today's sphere of international relations in the globalizing world. As a lingua franca, English is the intercultural language of our globalizing world. It was used in our joint seminars to make intercultural exchange initially possible.

Of course, a question arises: Is it even appropriate for students to learn about Japanese/German culture through interviews in English? The standard argument of intercultural pedagogy posits that if you want to know about another culture, you have to learn its language, which would have been Japanese/German in this case. So, what can be understood by communicating about emic Japanese/German cultural concepts in English as an intercultural language?

We suggest that communicating in English has a specific potential for intercultural learning. The students were challenged to translate the taken-for-granted emic Japanese/German concepts into English and explain them to foreigners in English. Therefore, using English exposed a specific opportunity to make their tacit cultural knowledge explicit (Mattig, 2017). This opportunity may have occurred by something other than simply communicating in Japanese/German.

## Conclusion

This paper focused on the learning processes involved in practitioner research of two online intercultural exchanges, elaborating upon intercultural competence. Our findings suggest that English can be effectively used for intercultural learning experiences about other cultures, even if

used as a lingua franca. However, our study also shows that even when used as a lingua franca, the English language does not function as a “neutral” medium of communication; rather, it certainly affects intercultural exchange.

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## Appendix

### QUESTIONNARIE

We would like to know your impressions of our international project. Please fill out the form below by choosing a number for each item and commenting on three of the items in detail. Thank you.

| | Strongly Disagree 1 | Disagree 2 | Neutral 3 | Agree 4 | Strongly Agree 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I enjoyed the international project. | | | | | |
| 2. I learned about the other culture. | | | | | |
| 3. This was new information for me. | | | | | |
| 4. I learned about intercultural interaction. | | | | | |
| 5. I wanted more intercultural interaction. | | | | | |
| 6. I liked asking questions. | | | | | |
| 7. I liked answering questions. | | | | | |
| 8. I liked working with LINE/Skype, etc. | | | | | |
| 9. My English speaking skills improved. | | | | | |
| 10. My English listening skills improved. | | | | | |
| 11. My English reading skills improved. | | | | | |
| 12. My English writing skills improved. | | | | | |
| 13. I learned about qualitative research. | | | | | |
| 14. I developed skills in qualitative research. | | | | | |

Comments about the above (please choose three items from above and comment in detail):

# 英語をリンガフランカとした文化概念に関する異文化間学習
# 日独の大学生によるオンライン交流

デビッド　ダルスキー *#、ルプレヒト　マティグ **

**要　旨**

この実践的研究プロジェクトでは、2つの異なる言語コミュニティ（すなわち、ドイツ語と日本語という異なる母語）の大学生間の異文化間交流が中心となり、英語を共通外国語とする2学期のオンライン交流が行われた。学生たちは日本文化の象徴的な概念について研究しており、著者らは教師としてゼミ（合計130名）の体系的な評価を行った。著者は、異文化間学習に関する評価結果について述べている。この国際的な教室での共同作業に関する学生の考察から、国際共通語としての英語は特定の文化に縛られることはないが、特定の文化に関する異文化間学習を開始するために教室でうまく使うことができることが示唆された。

［キーワード］文化言語学、EMIC概念、オンライン異文化交流、間文化性

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