

Intercultural Language Learning and Student Wellbeing: A Case Study of Japanese Students

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Abstract: This study examines the role of intercultural language learning in facilitating cultural adaptation and enhancing mental wellbeing among Japanese students participating in a 25-day intensive Hindi language program in Pune, India. Adopting a mixed-method, questionnaire-based case study approach, the research investigates how language acquisition, cultural immersion, and institutional support systems shape students' intercultural experiences. The findings reveal that language learning significantly improves students' communicative competence, fosters intercultural understanding, and enhances confidence and emotional comfort. However, certain challenges, including environmental adjustments and the intensity of instruction, influence students' overall adaptation. The study contributes to the growing body of research on intercultural education by offering insights into short-term language programs in a non-Western context, emphasizing the interrelationship between language learning, cultural adaptation, and student wellbeing.

Keywords: Intercultural learning, student wellbeing, Hindi language, Japanese students, cultural adaptation, short-term programs

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized academic landscape, intercultural language learning has become a vital component of higher education and international student mobility. Language acquisition is no longer confined to linguistic proficiency; it serves as a gateway to cultural understanding, identity formation, and psychological adjustment.

When students engage with a foreign language within its native socio-cultural context, they encounter diverse communicative norms, social structures, and cultural values. This immersion often results in a complex interplay between cognitive learning and emotional adaptation. For international students, particularly those enrolled in short-term intensive programs, this transition can be both enriching and challenging.

Initial encounters with unfamiliar scripts, communication barriers, and cultural differences may lead to anxiety or disorientation. However, sustained engagement with the host language and culture tends to foster intercultural competence, confidence, and emotional resilience.

Institutional support, peer interaction, and experiential learning environments further influence this adaptive process.

This study focuses on Japanese students participating in a 25-day intensive Hindi language program in Pune, India. It aims to explore how language learning and cultural immersion contribute to their intercultural adaptation and mental wellbeing.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the role of Hindi language learning in facilitating intercultural communication among Japanese students.
- To analyze the process of cultural adaptation during a short-term intensive program.
- To evaluate the impact of language learning on students' mental wellbeing, including confidence and emotional adjustment.
- To explore the influence of learning the Devanagari script on students' engagement with the local environment.
- To assess the role of social interactions with faculty, peers, and host communities.
- To identify key factors that support or hinder psychological comfort during the program.

3. CONTEXT: THE AUGP HINDI PROGRAM

The program under study is conducted within the framework of the Asia University Global Program (AUGP), Japan. AUGP is a well-established short-term study abroad initiative designed to promote language acquisition and intercultural competence among undergraduate students.

With over thirty years of experience, AUGP offers programs across multiple countries, typically during university vacation periods. The duration ranges from three weeks to two months, allowing students to participate without disrupting their academic schedules.

In India, the Hindi language program is conducted in collaboration with Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth (TMV), Pune. The program adopts an integrated approach combining classroom instruction with experiential learning.

Key Features of the Program

- Intensive Hindi language instruction focusing on grammar and communication
- Introduction to the Devanagari script
- Cultural immersion through interaction with local communities
- Experiential learning in real-life settings such as markets and public spaces
- Institutional support through faculty and host family engagement

The program aims to develop not only linguistic competence but also intercultural sensitivity and personal growth.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences in an intercultural setting.

4.2 Participants

The participants comprise Japanese students enrolled in a 25-day intensive Hindi language program at TMV, Pune.

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of:

- Close-ended items based on a five-point Likert scale
- Open-ended questions to capture qualitative insights

4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained through:

- Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality
- Obtaining informed consent
- Voluntary participation

5. RESULTS

This section presents the findings derived from both quantitative and qualitative data collected through the questionnaire. The results provide insights into students' intercultural learning experiences, communication development, cultural adaptation, and overall wellbeing during the 25-day Hindi language program.

5.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis is based on responses from four participants using a five-point Likert scale. The findings are presented across key thematic areas.

5.1.1 Impact of Hindi Language Learning on Communication Skills

The results indicate a strong positive impact of Hindi language learning on students' communication abilities. All participants (100%) reported improvement in their interactions with local people, with 50% selecting "Strongly Agree" and 50% selecting "Agree." No neutral or negative responses were recorded. This suggests that even within a short-term program, language acquisition plays a crucial role in facilitating effective communication and reducing intercultural barriers.

5.1.2 Cultural Adaptation and Comfort Level

Participants demonstrated a high level of cultural understanding and social adaptability. The mean score for both comfort in interacting with local people and understanding Indian cultural practices was 4.5, indicating strong agreement among respondents.

Adaptation to the local environment showed comparatively moderate results, with a mean score of 3.5, reflecting some variation in comfort levels. This suggests that while cultural comprehension was high, environmental adjustment posed certain challenges.

5.1.3 Role of Devanagari Script Learning

Learning the Devanagari script emerged as a significant factor in enhancing students' engagement with the local environment. All participants (100%) either agreed (75%) or strongly agreed (25%) that learning the script helped them feel more connected to their surroundings.

However, when considering functional application, such as understanding public signs, responses were more varied. Only 50% of participants agreed that they could understand signs and directions, while the remaining 50% selected a neutral response. This indicates that while script learning contributed to cultural connection, practical literacy development varied among individuals.

5.1.4 Perceived Support and Mental Wellbeing

Participants generally reported positive perceptions of support from faculty and host families. A majority (75%) expressed agreement or strong agreement that they felt supported during the program, while 25% reported neutral responses.

In terms of mental wellbeing, 75% of participants agreed that learning Hindi contributed to their emotional comfort, whereas 25% remained neutral. These findings suggest that language learning and support systems play an important role in enhancing students' psychological adjustment, though individual experiences may differ.

5.2 Qualitative Insights

Qualitative responses provide deeper insights into students' lived experiences, highlighting both positive aspects and challenges.

5.2.1 Challenges Faced by Students

Participants reported several challenges during their stay. The most frequently mentioned issue was environmental conditions, particularly air pollution, which affected physical wellbeing (reported by 50% of participants). Other challenges included difficulty adapting to the pace of instruction (25%) and safety concerns related to walking in the city (25%).

5.2.2 Changes in Perception Toward India

Participants' perceptions of India showed varied responses. Half of the participants (50%) reported a positive shift in their perception, describing Indian people as warm and kind, and expressing appreciation for the country's culture, nature, and heritage. One participant (25%) reported mixed experiences, noting both positive interactions and instances of perceived discrimination. Another participant (25%) indicated no significant change in perception.

However, some challenges were identified:

- Environmental differences, including climate and lifestyle, caused initial discomfort.
- The intensive pace of instruction was demanding for some students.

5.3 Quantitative Findings

Table 1: Impact of Hindi Language Learning on Communication Skills (n = 25)

Response Category	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	50%
Agree	50%
Neutral	0%
Disagree	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%

Interpretation:

All participants (100%) agreed that Hindi language learning significantly improved their communication with local people.

Table 2: Cultural Adaptation and Comfort Level

Statement	Mean Score (1–5)
I felt comfortable interacting with locals	4.5
I understood Indian cultural practices	4.5

I adapted well to the local environment	3.5
I experienced cultural stress	2.8

Interpretation:

Students demonstrated high cultural understanding, though environmental adaptation showed relatively lower comfort levels.

Table 3: Role of Devanagari Script Learning

Impact Area	Agree (%)
Reading public signs	50%
Navigating public spaces	100%
Understanding basic written Hindi	100%

Interpretation:

Learning the script significantly enhanced students' functional engagement with their surroundings.

Table 4: Challenges Faced by Students

Challenge Type	Percentage (%)
Environmental issues (air pollution)	50%
Instructional pace difficulty	25%
Safety concerns (walking conditions)	25%

Interpretation:

The pace of instruction and environmental factors emerged as the most significant challenges.

5.3.1 Qualitative Insights

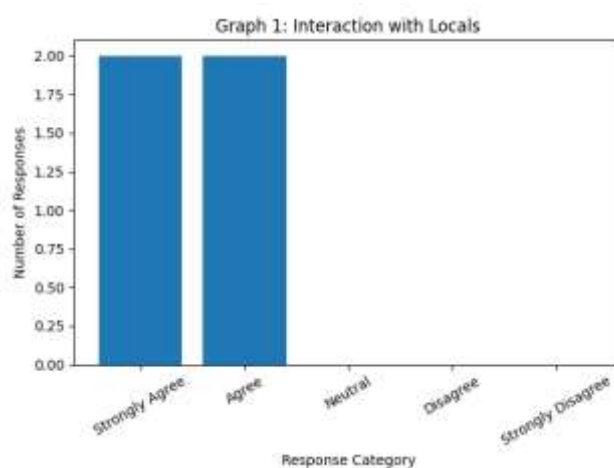
Key themes emerging from open-ended responses:

- **Increased Confidence:** “I felt more confident speaking with locals after learning basic Hindi.”

- **Cultural Curiosity:** “Understanding Indian culture made the experience more meaningful.”
- **Initial Anxiety:** “The environment was overwhelming in the beginning.”
- **Support Systems:** “Teachers and host families helped me adjust quickly.”

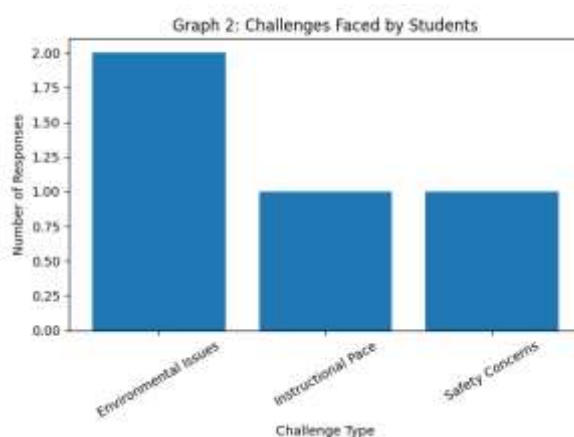
5.3.2 Graphical Representation

- X-axis: Response categories
- Y-axis: Percentage
- Shows majority agreement on communication improvement

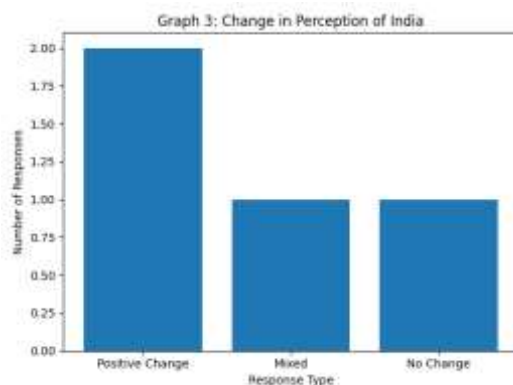


Graph 1: Communication Improvement

- Challenges Experienced During the Program



Graph 2: Challenged faced



Graph 3: Change in Students' Perception of India

As shown in Table 1, all participants (100%) expressed positive perceptions regarding the impact of Hindi language learning on communication. Additionally, Table 2 reflects a high level of cultural understanding (Mean = 4.5), indicating successful intercultural adaptation.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the important role of language learning in facilitating intercultural communication, cultural awareness, and emotional comfort. While students adapted well socially and culturally, environmental factors influenced their overall comfort levels. The results suggest that language learning, combined with cultural immersion and support systems, enhances student wellbeing. However, differences in individual experiences and challenges indicate the need for flexible teaching approaches and stronger support mechanisms in short-term programs.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several practical implications can be identified for the design and implementation of short-term intercultural language programs.

It is essential to provide pre-departure orientation to prepare students for cultural, environmental, and social differences. As the results indicated challenges related to environmental conditions and adaptation, prior awareness can help reduce initial discomfort and anxiety.

The study highlights the need for flexible and adaptive teaching methodologies. Given that some participants found the pace of instruction demanding, especially due to differences in

linguistic background, instructors should adopt differentiated teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning needs.

Strengthening mentorship and support systems is crucial. Although most participants reported positive support from faculty and host families, variations in responses suggest the need for more structured and consistent guidance, including peer-support networks and regular feedback mechanisms.

Incorporating wellbeing-focused interventions can enhance students' overall experience. Since environmental factors such as air pollution affected physical comfort, institutions should integrate health awareness sessions, coping strategies, and access to support services.

Promoting community engagement and experiential learning opportunities can further enrich intercultural understanding. Activities that encourage interaction with local communities, such as field visits and cultural exchanges, can deepen students' cultural immersion and practical language use.

8. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The primary limitation is the small sample size ($n = 4$), which restricts the generalizability of the findings. While the results provide valuable insights into students' experiences, they may not represent the broader population of international learners. Additionally, the study focuses on a specific group of Japanese students participating in a short-term Hindi language program. Cultural background and prior learning experiences may influence perceptions, limiting the applicability of findings to other contexts. The short duration of the program (25 days) is another constraint. While meaningful intercultural learning was observed, longer-term effects on language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and wellbeing could not be assessed.

8.1 Scope for Future Research

- Conducting studies with larger and more diverse participant groups to enhance generalizability
- Undertaking longitudinal research to examine long-term impacts of intercultural language learning on communication skills and wellbeing

- Comparing different cultural and linguistic **contexts** to understand how intercultural adaptation varies across settings
- Exploring the role of pedagogical approaches and curriculum design in improving learning outcomes
- Investigating the relationship between environmental factors and student wellbeing in study abroad programs

9. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that short-term language programs, such as the AUGP Hindi course, play a significant role in promoting intercultural learning and enhancing student wellbeing. Language acquisition serves as a key bridge for communication, cultural integration, and emotional adjustment, while experiential learning further strengthens student engagement with the host environment.

The findings also highlight the importance of supportive academic and social environments in maximizing the effectiveness of such programs. However, challenges related to environmental adaptation and instructional design indicate the need for continuous improvement. A balanced approach that integrates language learning, cultural exposure, and institutional support is essential for ensuring a more holistic and successful intercultural adaptation experience.

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