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Perceived Learning Outcomes of a Short-Term Collaborative Learning Program: Toward Developing Intercultural Competence and Equitable Global North–South Partnerships

Sho Shimoyamada
Center for Global Education, The University of Tokyo, Japan

ABSTRACT: *This study investigated Japanese students' perceived learning outcomes from a short-term program jointly conducted by the University of Tokyo and Asian University for Women in Bangladesh through the lens of intercultural competence and the contact hypothesis. Qualitative data were derived primarily from Japanese students' essays. Inductive analysis revealed that intergroup interactions enhanced Japanese students' awareness of social inequalities, diverse ethnic identities, prevailing stereotypes against the Global South, their own privilege, and Japan's colonial legacy. This study makes theoretical contributions by illuminating the potential for inappropriate and ineffective interactions with outgroup peers. These findings suggest that educators should create environments where learners feel safe in making communicative mistakes and avoid hastily developing learners' intercultural competence.*

Keywords: Contact hypothesis, Global North, Global South, Inappropriate and ineffective communication, Intercultural competence, Short-term collaborative program

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Corresponding author: Sho Shimoyamada, Address: 7-3-1 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6174-436X>

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INTRODUCTION

Collaborative intercultural learning programs are expected to increase students' intercultural competence (Goh et al., 2024), prompt them to reflect on their identity (Muilerman-Rodrigo, 2024), and increase their awareness of diversity (Nakata et al., 2025) by facilitating meaningful interactions between students from different cultural backgrounds (Suematsu, 2024). Intergroup communication is especially encouraged when such programs are conducted overseas, even during brief visits. Therefore, short-term overseas programs are, at face value, promising pedagogies that yield educational benefits, including the growth of intercultural competence (Nyunt, 2024). However, intergroup interactions are also possible online. In the last decade, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in applying the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) to virtual exchange programs has increased (e.g., Dalsky & Su, 2023). A recent study of collaborative online international learning highlighted its impact on the development of intercultural competence (Hackett et al., 2023). *What are the educational mediums through which learners gain learning outcomes unique to short-term study abroad programs?*

One prospect for successful in-person overseas programs is educational collaboration between universities in starkly different contexts. Therefore, partnerships between universities in the Global North and South have the potential to provide life-changing and transformative learning experiences (Jotia et al., 2020; Martin & Griffiths, 2013). Nevertheless, studies on short-term programs collaboratively implemented by universities from the Global North and South are scarce. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to propose pedagogical implications after evaluating the perceived learning outcomes of a short-term overseas program jointly conducted by the University of Tokyo (UTokyo) and Asian University for Women (AUW), Bangladesh. Drawing on UTokyo students' experiences of their 11-day sojourn in Chittagong, Bangladesh, this study analyzed their written reflections, follow-up interviews, and field notes documenting onsite observations. To highlight the uniqueness of this in-person program, supplementary data were also collected from an online summer program with AUW. A qualitative analysis conducted through the lens of intercultural competence sheds light on the perceived learning outcomes of UTokyo students through intergroup interactions. The importance of such intergroup interactions is underscored by the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954). Within this framework, this study defines Japanese participants in short-term overseas programs as international students who cross borders and interact with out-group members during their sojourn.

This study contributes to the discourse on intercultural competence by demonstrating how inappropriate and ineffective communication may have

positive effects on learners' cognitive development. Its findings demonstrate that communicative challenges—such as being stuck in awkward silence, being unable to swiftly respond, and being at a loss for words—were provocative and learning-rich experiences for the UTokyo students. These experiences prompted them to increase their awareness of inequality, diverse ethnic identities, stereotypes associated with the Global South, their own privilege, and Japan's colonial legacy. UTokyo students' communications with AUW students may have not resulted in the “desired outcomes” of intercultural learning (Deardorff, 2006) in the short run. Still, these experiences corroborated their attentiveness to and respect for their AUW peers. Therefore, student-led bottom-up approaches to Global North–South partnerships are recommended. Despite these positive findings and their valuable implications, the value of inappropriate and ineffective communication remains underexplored, as explained in the following section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the extensive literature on intercultural competence and short-term overseas programs, this review focused on topics closely related to the research focus and context. The coverage was informed by later findings, as this study was conducted inductively.

Intercultural Competence and Identity Development

Despite the lack of consensus in the definition of intercultural competence, experts generally agree that the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively is its primary component (e.g., Byram, 1997). Deardorff (2006) was the first to identify “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 249) as the most widely supported definition by scholarly experts. However, this agreement should be interpreted with caution for two reasons. First, Deardorff's (2006) research participants were mostly Euro-Americans, whose perspective emphasizes individualism and communicative competence, enabling appropriate interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Bruneau, 2002; Byram, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Wiseman, 2003). Indeed, Dai and Feng's (2024) research revealed that East Asian experts emphasized the importance of collectivism and harmonious interrelationships between individuals, confirming a tendency already reported in previous studies (Dai & Chen, 2015; Takai & Ota, 1994; Yum, 2012).

Second, it is highly questionable whether students who fail to communicate appropriately and effectively should be labeled “interculturally incompetent.” Understanding what is appropriate in intercultural settings requires substantial knowledge of outgroup cultures, which college students with limited international experience are unlikely to possess. Specifically, it is infeasible for students to know the individual-level details of an outgroup, such as its members' identities. Identity is the socially constructed perception of who person A thinks they are

(i.e., a chosen identity) and who person B thinks A is (i.e., an assigned identity) (Grotevant, 1992). The former is unknown to B unless B asks A about their identity. A discrepancy between the identity chosen by A and assigned to A by B may cause emotional distress for A (Higgins, 1987). This state of mind, known as “self-discrepancy” (Higgins, 1987), may contradict the “desired outcome” of intercultural learning (Deardorff, 2006). Arguably, making inappropriate behaviors and remarks may be desirable for students’ personal growth because mistakes are necessary steppingstones for success. Paradoxically, Dai and Feng (2024) revealed that East Asians tend to place more emphasis on behavioral outcomes than Euro-Americans do. Although this indicates the need to empirically investigate the value of inappropriate interactions in intercultural settings, scholarly attempts to do so are scarce.

Short-Term Study Abroad and Global North–South Collaborations as Transformative Pedagogy

Studying abroad is often regarded as a catalyst for the development of intercultural competence (Nyunt et al., 2024) because intercultural learning occurs through communication among members of different cultural groups (Berg et al., 2023). As year- or semester-long study abroad programs are challenging for students with limited overseas experience, short-term educational trips are a common first step. However, short-term overseas programs can lead to problematic outcomes, such as the reinforcement of tourist-like and consumerist attitudes, rather than fostering intercultural mindsets, because short durations do not enable immersion in outgroup cultures (George Mwangi & Yao, 2021). When students from the Global North travel to the Global South, they may apply neocolonial sensibilities to interpret their experiences (Appel et al., 2017; Sharpe, 2015). Political power dynamics spill over into the intellectual realm because equitable partnerships between Global North and South universities are impeded if the former regard the latter as illegitimate producers of knowledge (Lumb, 2023; Schoole et al., 2023). Nevertheless, study abroad programs may redress these perceived inequalities (Jotia et al., 2020), indicating the need for more research into the pedagogical strength of short-term programs conducted by universities in the Global North and South.

Researchers agree that the acquisition of cultural knowledge is the most common goal of short-term study abroad (Niehaus & Wegener, 2018) and intercultural learning (Niehaus & Nyunt, 2020). In other words, emphasis is not placed on skill development. This is paradoxical because overseas learning is expected to foster intercultural competence and skills by requiring students to navigate multicultural settings (Nyunt et al., 2024). In addition, although it is tautologically true that intercultural collaborative learning aims to increase cultural awareness (Goh et al., 2024), what culture is worthy of learning remains underexplored. Programs conducted in the Global South offer students from the Global North exposure to cultures starkly different from their own, although, as Saidi (2024) criticizes, intercultural education in the Global South may imbue its learners with ideas of exoticism, colonialism, and didactic superiority of the

Global North. Even more problematic is the overemphasis on increased awareness of Global South cultures and a dearth of research on overseas programs' impacts on the perception of Global North cultures.

Japanese Culture and Its Incompatibility with East–West Dichotomy

As this study aimed to explore how Japanese students benefit from intercultural learning, it was necessary to consider the complexity of Japanese culture. A political event called the Meiji Restoration in 1868, which marked the end of the Japanese feudal period, was the dawn of Japan's modernization and Westernization. Since the early Meiji era, many intellectuals and pundits have debated whether Japan belongs to Asia or the West, as they have found its geography and culture to be unmatched (Duus, 2001). For example, Yukichi Fukuzawa, the founder of Keio University in Japan, is known for his political slogan “datsu-a ron” or “on leaving Asia” (Fukuzawa, 1885; Jacob, 2025). In contrast to Fukuzawa, a renowned art critic, Kakuzō/Tenshin Okakura, distinguished Asian culture from Western culture and emphasized cultural commonalities in Asia (Ching, 2023; Okakura, 1903). A prominent cultural critic, Shuichi Katō, ascribed the uniqueness of Japanese culture to the hybridity of the East and West (Bukh, 2014; Kato, 1986). Therefore, comprehending Japanese people's perceptions of their own culture is not as straightforward as the reductionist dichotomy between East and West would suggest. The prevailing assumption that Japan is homogenous must be questioned (Kawai, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONTACT HYPOTHESIS

The contact hypothesis was proposed by Allport (1954), who contended that the positive outcomes of intergroup contact, namely, the reduction of prejudice and discrimination against outgroups, occur under four optimal conditions: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authority support (Kite et al., 2022). In higher education environments, intergroup contact and cultural competence intersect (Adebayo & Sunderman, 2025). Intergroup contact has been proven to be effective in minimizing group or identity distinctions in educational settings (Vezzali et al., 2023). Notwithstanding the reported positive educational benefits, intergroup contact can result in a reduced intention to interact with outgroups in the future or even with any outgroup members, as posited by the avoidance generalization effect (Meleady & Forder, 2018). Friendships partially determine whether positive benefits are gained from intergroup contact in educational contexts (Pehar et al., 2024). In addition, intergroup contact includes not only actual, in-person interactions but also online student exchanges (Hackett et al., 2023). Thus, the contact hypothesis is an ideal lens for assessing the value of in-person, intercultural collaborative learning.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study used interpretivism to understand the subjectivity of a small cohort of research participants (UTokyo students). The interpretivist paradigm is particularly suitable in situations in which there is little or no *a priori* theory (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Therefore, it was considered compatible with this study due to the paucity of existing studies on overseas intercultural programs conducted collaboratively by Japanese and South Asian universities. The rationale for the other methodological decisions is explained below.

Research Design

This study was designed as a case study because of the unique contrast between UTokyo and AUW. Established in 1877, UTokyo has earned a reputation as a premier academic institution in the domestic academic landscape (Ishikawa, 2021) and is one of the top Asian universities in global rankings (Yonezawa, 2021). However, universities face a long-standing gender imbalance in the student population (approximately 80 males and 20% females) (Yaguchi, 2024). In contrast, AUW is an emerging women's college that was established in 2008, offering liberal arts education to young female talent confronted with socioeconomic hardship and fostering their global leadership (Ahmad, 2024). In short, the sharp differences between UTokyo and AUW highlight the educational value of the intercultural collaborative learning program.

Data Collection

This study was based on a short-term overseas program conducted at the AUW campuses and other locations in Chittagong, Bangladesh, from February 23 to March 5, 2024. Entitled "The Movement of People in the 21st Century: Migration, Immigration and Refugees," this program primarily comprised on-campus lectures on a wide range of topics relevant to the title (e.g., the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox Bazar) and visits local sites such as religious facilities (e.g., Hindu temples) and industrial hubs (e.g., garment factories). The program also included experience-sharing sessions in which the AUW students spoke about their cultural backgrounds and upbringing. This often took place in a storytelling format, with AUW students communicating narratives regarding their hardships and successful enrollment. The program concluded with a ceremony in which the Executive Vice President of UTokyo and the Vice-Chancellor of AUW signed a memorandum of agreement to officially initiate a university-wide student-exchange partnership.

As shown in Table 1, 15 UTokyo and 16 AUW students (mostly undergraduates) participated in the program and interacted through organized sessions and informal conversations. The AUW students were from diverse backgrounds compared with the UTokyo students, who were relatively

homogeneous. Importantly, participants from UTokyo were by no means representative of the entire student population in terms of gender.

Table 1: Profiles of UTokyo and AUW Students Who Participated in the Program

		UTokyo	AUW
Gender	Female	11	16
	Male	4	0
Nationality	Japan	15	0
	Bangladesh	0	5
	Myanmar	0	3
	Afghanistan	0	2
	Timor Leste	0	2
	India	0	1
	Nepal	0	1
	Pakistan	0	1
	Sri Lanka	0	1
	Other	1*	0
Year of Study	1 st year post-graduate	1	0
	4 th year undergraduate	5	0
	3 rd year undergraduate	3	3
	2 nd year undergraduate	4	7
	1 st year undergraduate	2	6

Note. *One of the UTokyo students held dual nationalities.

Table 2: Student Subject Fields

University	Subject Field	Students
UTokyo	Humanities and Social Sciences (Junior Division)	6
	Law	3
	Sociology	1
	Economics	1
	International Relations	1
	Language and Information Sciences	1
	Contemporary Literary Studies	1
AUW	Engineering	1
	Public Health	5
	Environmental Sciences	4
	Economics	4
	Computer Science	2
	Politics, Philosophy & Economics	1
	Bioinformatics	1

Note. All 1st and 2nd year UTokyo students are in the Junior Division of the College of Arts and Sciences. They receive basic education in either the humanities or social sciences or the natural sciences and then select their major in the 2nd year. AUW students select their major(s) in the last semester of their 1st year or in the 2nd year, and they may major in two subject fields.

The 15 UTokyo students were from different colleges and faculties (Table 2) and were selected for the program internally. UTokyo students who had participated in a previous program conducted at UTokyo in July and August 2023 were prioritized over new applicants. This program was the first opportunity for all UTokyo students to visit Bangladesh. Two of the 15 students had participated in student exchange or gap year programs abroad, but the rest had limited or no overseas experience.

This study leveraged post-program essays written by UTokyo participants as its primary data source. Students were instructed to reflect on any learning outcomes from the program, such as unforgettable interactions with AUW students, as well as future aspirations. Essays were written in Japanese, the first language of all participants. Students were informed in advance that the submitted essays would be shared with a charitable foundation that sponsored the program. All participants completed this post-program assignment, implying that no sampling was conducted. The study also collected supplementary data from follow-up email interviews with selected UTokyo students and from the researcher's field notes, which documented students' behaviors and remarks during the program.

To highlight the pedagogical uniqueness of the in-person exchange program, supplementary data were also collected from an online exchange course with AUW in August 2022. The overarching theme of this course was "visualizing gender." Twenty UTokyo students, none of whom participated in the in-person program, and 19 AUW students attended lectures together and engaged in group work to create a short film on gender-related issues in their own context. Upon completing the course, UTokyo students were asked to complete an online 10-question survey to reflect on their learning experiences (Appendix). The following two questions were particularly relevant for understanding the characteristics of online exchange as a learning medium.

- Choose items or "none" from below that you feel need improvements. (multiple-choice question)
- Why did you choose these items in the previous question? (open-ended questions)

In summary, this study utilized four types of qualitative data: post-program essays, follow-up interviews, author field notes, and descriptive answers collected from an online questionnaire. These data were triangulated to gain a comprehensive understanding of UTokyo students' learning outcomes and relevant contextual information, as well as the uniqueness of in-person intercultural collaborative learning.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was selected because of its adaptability to different theoretical foundations and was conducted in a four-step manner suitable for educational research: identification of keywords/phrases, searching for tentative themes, reviewing and establishing themes, and establishing an order/hierarchy of themes (Kushnir, 2025). The essays and field notes were read repeatedly to identify keywords/phrases and tentative themes, which were then rigorously defined to understand the patterns of meaning across the collected dataset. This research considered two major themes: UTokyo students' learning outcomes and the medium through which the outcomes were produced. These were subsequently subdivided into subcategories. As shown in Table 3, six themes were identified as learning outcomes from the in-person program.

Table 3: *Learning Outcomes of In-person Communication with A UW Students*

Themes	Definitions
Intercultural competence and the value of inappropriacy	Failures at communicating appropriately and effectively, and their positive impacts on the understanding of outgroup members, i.e., A UW students.
A UW students' diverse cultural backgrounds and complex identities	Increased awareness of complexities surrounding A UW students' perceived first languages and national/ethnic identities.
Reduction of prejudice against the Global South	Growing recognition that A UW students are by no means inferior to UTokyo students and are rather more motivated than UTokyo students.
Collective disapproval of UTokyo students	UTokyo students' self-reproach and its extension to other ingroup members, such as other UTokyo students or Japanese college students in general.
UTokyo students' identity and extant dichotomies	Deeply ingrained binary construal and worldview (e.g., the West versus East) and their influence on UTokyo's students' identity development.
Development of friendships through in-person communications	Intergroup friendships formed through face-to-face interactions. Online or virtual exchange proved to be an unsuccessful medium of making friends with outgroup members.

While conducting this analysis, essays and field notes were not translated into English to prevent loss or misinterpretation of their original meaning (Van Nes et al., 2010). The definition of each theme was repeatedly reviewed to improve the quality of the analysis. Member checking is an important component of the process and is a measure used to attribute trustworthiness and authenticity to qualitative enquiries (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Furthermore, the author emailed the students and requested that they validate the study's interpretations of what they had said. Their feedback further enhanced the accuracy of the established themes, which were then translated into English.

Reflexivity

My positionality as a university lecturer who led this educational trip may have influenced the UTokyo students' self-reported learning outcomes. During the program, I shared comments with the students at several instances. On the second day, for example, I mentioned a stark contrast between the extremely poor, chaotic conditions on the street and a luxurious hotel where we had a decent lunch because I wanted my students to be aware of the juxtaposition between adjacent poverty and wealth, as well as the sheer economic disparity. This may have given the students a sense of their privilege. Indeed, many of them compared their upbringing and environment with the AUW students' underprivileged backgrounds.

Research Ethics

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the author's affiliated institution (reference number: 001). The author explained the purpose of this study to all participants (UTokyo students) and informed them that they could refuse any related requests for any reason. All the participants provided informed consent and agreed to participate. This article quotes their comments anonymously to protect their privacy. The data are password-protected and stored in secure cloud storage. It will remain in storage for 10 years after the completion of this study, in accordance with the regulations of the author's research institution.

FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis illuminated the affordance of in-person overseas programs as UTokyo students were astonished by, to quote their words, the "sheer poverty adjacent to our accommodation," "spiciness of every dish," "poor visibility caused by air pollution," and "stench of food waste dumped on the street." Their essays also suggested that intergroup communication with AUW students represented rich learning opportunities full of perceptive insights and "the most provocative experiences." Its importance was also underscored quantitatively, as 13 of 15 UTokyo students reflected on what they learned and felt through small

conversations with their A UW peers. These conversations took place during tea breaks, lunch, and on buses during site visits. In contrast, only two UTokyo students mentioned lectures. Their perceived learning outcomes were then classified into six categories on the basis of the identified themes.

Intercultural Competence and the Value of Inappropriacy

Intergroup contact enabled the UTokyo students to learn about A UW students' underprivileged backgrounds. For example, a female UTokyo student noted that one of her Bangladeshi friends had given up her aspiration to study at an American graduate school because she had to reside in her hometown after graduation and marry a man chosen by her parents. In contrast, arranged marriages are no longer conventional in contemporary Japan. In her essay, this Japanese student recalled how she felt about this cultural difference.

The program was a good opportunity to interact with many A UW students. One of their most unforgettable remarks was "To me, it is like a movie." This student loves Japanese animations that feature youth romances. She asked me whether I dated someone, and I told her about my boyfriend. It lit up her eyes, and she excitedly said, "It is like a movie!" Feeling embarrassed, I said, "Not at all, it is normal." After awkward silence, she made the remark: "*To me*, it is like a movie." I was screwed up.

(Female, 3rd year law student)

As this excerpt shows, this A UW student said, "It is like a movie" twice. However, she added "*To me*" to the second remark, implying a difference in cultural norms. While it is common for young women in Japan to date someone they love, this is not the case for some South Asian women. The awkward silence in their conversation signaled that both the UTokyo and A UW students became conscious of this cultural difference. The UTokyo student said, "I was screwed up," admitting that her response was inappropriate. Given that intercultural competence refers to the ability to interact appropriately (Dai & Feng, 2024; Dearnorff, 2006; Wiseman, 2003), her communication resulted in failure. However, this communication jolted the UTokyo student's conscience and encouraged her to develop a critical attitude toward her unnoticed privilege. As she continued, "Like me, Japanese people take our privileges for granted, without questioning what is normal." This demonstrates her cognitive growth and, therefore, raises questions as to whether it is meaningful to evaluate the ability to communicate appropriately at one point in time. This will be discussed in the following section.

A UW Students' Diverse Cultural Backgrounds and Complex Identities

Unsurprisingly, the UTokyo students documented the diversity of the A UW students' cultures. For example, one UTokyo student described A UW as "a

microcosm of South Asia where diverse cultures neither completely mix nor stay separate.” Similarly, another UTokyo student mentioned that Afghan students with colorful clothes broadened their horizons because “all Afghan women who appear on TV wear black.” In contrast to expectations, however, several UTokyo students analyzed how their AUW peers identified. For example, an intergroup interaction with an AUW student from Sri Lanka offered a male UTokyo student some fresh insights into the linguistic diversity and national identity of the country, as quoted below:

When chatting with a student from southern Sri Lanka, where Sinhala is spoken, I said, “Sri Lanka is an interesting country, right? People in the South speak different languages from those in the North.” She chuckled and responded, “I do not like the idea of dividing our country into the north and south, or here and there. Despite different languages spoken, we are all in the same country, Sri Lanka, and we get along.” This was eye-opening because I did not have this kind of sensibility, to be honest.

(Male, 3rd year law student)

Like the essay excerpt quoted earlier, this written reflection confirms the important role that intergroup contact plays in improving the understanding of outgroups (Allport, 1954). This is because the interaction between male UTokyo and female AUW students resulted in awkwardness, which prompted him to raise awareness of linguistic diversity in Sri Lanka. The remark “I did not have this kind of sensibility” suggests that he was perplexed by this AUW student’s identity. To understand his reflections, it is useful to revisit the identity literature reviewed earlier (Grotevant, 1992; Higgins, 1987). The UTokyo student demonstrated an understanding of linguistic and ethnic diversity in Sri Lanka, whereas the AUW student, who spoke Sinhala as her first language, identified as Sri Lankan. This implies a discrepancy between the identities chosen by the self and those assigned by others (Grotevant, 1992; Higgins, 1987). In the same essay, this UTokyo student also described Baloch students who seldom spoke Urdu and did not identify themselves as Pakistani. This aligns with his presumption that AUW students have identities unique to their ethnicities rather than their nations/countries. In short, he learned that he could not understand AUW students’ identities until he talked about them with them.

Reduction of Prejudice Against the Global South

Unsurprisingly, interactions between UTokyo and AUW students brought about the oft-emphasized benefits of intergroup contact, that is, the reduction of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Malu, 2025). As previously mentioned, existing studies have reported a perceived power imbalance between educational institutions in the Global North and South (Lumb, 2023). The following quote from an essay written by a female UTokyo student who pursues academic interest in third-world feminism indicates that she had this prejudice but dispelled it after engaging in a dialog with AUW students:

“Having learned about immigrants, migrants and refugees through this program, how do you want to utilize knowledge in the future?” An A UW student asked this question, which remains the most memorable. Her straightforward gaze, unwavering in its assumption that we, UTokyo students, who came all the way from Japan, possessed the enthusiasm to change something in the future, struck me with a powerful impact. I was taken aback, faltered, and gave an ambiguous answer to brush it off... it was a shock to realize that this A UW student was equal or even “superior” to me, someone born in the “*First World*” and a student at the University of Tokyo. The A UW student who posed the initial question recognized me as an equal partner in solving the problems faced by immigrants, migrants, and refugees.

(Female, 2nd year liberal arts student)

The essay excerpt above provides two nuanced reasons why this short conversation dispelled this UTokyo student’s prejudice. First, as already mentioned, the description of stumbling over the question “Having learned about immigrants, migrants and refugees through this program, how do you want to utilize knowledge in the future?” indicates that her conception of A UW students as ‘superior’ is attributed to pragmatism. On many occasions, A UW students vocally explained societal issues in their home countries, as well as issue-driven approaches to studying at the tertiary level. As analyzed later, many UTokyo students complimented the A UW students’ pragmatic motivations. Another reason why this female UTokyo student eradicated her prejudice was her identity as someone from the “*First World*”. This indicates that she contextualized her personal friendship with this A UW student within the scholarly discourse on third-world feminism. Even though the scholarship taught her about the importance of equitable partnerships, she admitted imagining, to quote her own words, an “asymmetrical relationship between the First World as the supporting donors and the Third World as the recipient of support, who lacks agency.”

Disapproval of UTokyo Students and Collectivism

The belief that pragmatic motivations are ideal is omnipresent in UTokyo students’ written reflections. For example, a male UTokyo student explained that he “regrets having taken no action to solve social issues.” This kind of self-reproach was closely connected to the approval of A UW students because, as reported earlier, they were motivated to study for the betterment of society. For example, a female UTokyo student explained that one of her A UW peers, a victim of child marriage, was determined to increase women’s presence in society. She elaborates on her thoughts as follows:

The University of Tokyo, the institution I had long aspired to enrol at, proclaims that “(as part of our admissions policy) ... we aim to instil within talented people the desire and ability to discover and solve issues while utilizing a high level of specialized knowledge, possessing wide-

ranging international viewpoints, and displaying a deep understanding of Japanese history and culture. We also aim to educate these people so that they may undertake their public responsibilities as citizens while thinking and acting for themselves and exercising a resilient and pioneering spirit.” Even though most of my college peers come from wealthy and prestigious families, they are committed neither to changing nor improving society. In Japan, where a majority of high school students can attend university, the value of studying there has been diminishing. In contrast, AUW students seemed to be a better match with our admissions policy.

(Female, 4th year engineering student)

The uniqueness of this interview excerpt is the quotation from UTokyo’s admissions policy. While this UTokyo student implicitly highlighted the discrepancy between the policy and her indifferent college peers, she regarded her AUW peers as ‘a better match with our admissions policy’. Similarly, another UTokyo student contended, “In Japan, we students do not value learning experiences at college but college degrees, ... because degrees obtained from acclaimed universities enhance employability.” The fact that their criticism was directed against their ingroup—UTokyo students in general—is a sign of collectivism infused with their construal. Evidence from the literature on intercultural competence shows that collectivism is more relevant in East Asia than in Euro-American cultures (Dai & Feng, 2024; Miyahara, 1995). However, there was a subtle difference between the prevailing notion and meaning-making that emerged in this cohort of UTokyo students. Collectivism is a mindset or communicative competence that values harmonious interdependence between individuals (Dai & Chen, 2015; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Takai & Ota, 1994; Yum, 2012), but UTokyo students’ reflections are characterized by a spillover effect, as their self-reproach often extends to all UTokyo students or even Japanese college students in general. The extension of self-reproach to other members of UTokyo or Japanese college students may ruin ingroup harmony while clearly treating AUW students as “others.”

UTokyo Students’ Identity and the Extant Dichotomies

The binary conception of UTokyo and AUW students as “we” and “they” permeated the UTokyo students’ essays. Similarly, UTokyo students premised their opinions on the dichotomies between developed and developing countries, the West and East, the First and Third World, and the suzerain and colonized states. Postwar Japan may have been a quintessence of the paradoxical world order because the nation used to colonize many parts of Asia, and both are known as the East (Seaton, 2025). Thus, there is no simple correspondence between the East and the colonized. The following reflection by a UTokyo student suggests an interpretation of Japan’s complicated positionality:

The fact that the West, including Japan, colonized Asia and is still exploiting people in Asia is certainly a factor that has contributed to the socioeconomic challenges in Bangladesh and other countries that A UW students come from... Needless to say, privileged people in the Western world, like me, must not abandon or criticize them (non-Western people). However, assuming the superiority of the West and forcing them to accept Western methods for improving their society would impede attempts to rid colonialism.

(Female, 2nd year economics student)

The most striking feature of her thinking is the conception of Japan as part of the West. In a follow-up interview, she explicitly “included Japan in the West” because of “the historical fact that we, under the imperial regime, colonized other Asian countries” and “the current economic situation that Japanese multinational manufacturing corporations have factories in other Asian countries.” The UTokyo students’ worldview may echo that of Fukuzawa, who tried to detach Japan from Asia, but unlike Fukuzawa (1885), she did not promote Westernization. Rather, her words signal her empathy for Asian countries other than Japan; therefore, Okakura’s (1903) pursuit of unity in Asia resonates with this student. However, she again explicitly counted Japan as part of the West, distinguishing herself from the eclecticism advocated by Kato (1986). In short, none of the expert views introduced earlier are applicable to this student’s construal.

Development of Friendships Through In-person Communications

The fact that UTokyo students othered A UW students did not prevent them from forming friendships. While some UTokyo students described A UW peers as “friends” and “equal partners,” they were also cognizant of A UW students’ challenging backgrounds and absurd hardships, such as civil wars and religious and ethnic persecution. A female UTokyo student wrote,

I became friends with a refugee student. Now, rather than thinking of refugees as a vague, abstract category, I feel connected to them as friends. They are young people just like us, and they have the right to pursue their dreams and a bright future. A person's potential for the future should never be taken away simply because of where they were born or their nationality.

(Female, 4th year law student)

This essay highlights the dilemmas faced by many Tokyo students. While UTokyo students believed that their A UW friends are inherently entitled to “pursue their dreams and a bright future,” the first-person narratives of A UW students taught UTokyo students that human rights are often infringed in many Asian contexts unfamiliar to them. As one UTokyo student stressed, the victims of the unequal violation of human rights were no longer ‘someone in the books, textbooks or news media’ but were their friends.

Arguably, this was a significant learning outcome unique to the in-person program because an online exchange conducted in the summer of 2022 could not enable UTokyo students to make friends with AUW students. An analysis of its post-program survey revealed that 14 out of 20 UTokyo participants described “communication with students at a counterpart institution” as unsatisfactory, confirming a previously reported need for more intergroup student discussions in an online transcultural learning session (Dalsky, 2023). A female UTokyo participant in the online program emphasized the same need:

I was disappointed that I did not have the chance to speak directly with the AUW students. Although the program is over, I strongly hope that I will have the opportunity to speak with them in the future, online, or in person. The program was a good opportunity to exchange ideas with a diverse group of people but not an opportunity to make friends with them. I would like to have a friendship with them.

(Female, 2nd year economics student)

This excerpt shows UTokyo students’ dissatisfaction. Similarly, other UTokyo students critically commented on scarce chances to have “small talks” with AUW participants. Theoretically, it is possible to invite students to different virtual rooms to chat with each other. However, internet connections in Bangladesh are unstable, and people are often disconnected. The author and colleagues have already experienced this technical challenge when conducting a previous virtual exchange program in winter 2022 and, therefore, refrained from implementing an interactive session in the summer online program. Technological trouble was never negligible and hence was an impediment to in-depth intergroup interactions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What are the educational mediums through which learners gain learning outcomes unique to short-term study abroad programs? To answer this question, qualitative data collected from UTokyo students’ post-program essays, follow-up interviews, the author’s field notes, and an online survey were analyzed. As is evident from the above findings, UTokyo students’ perceptions were largely influenced by their interactions with AUW students. Six categories of perceived learning outcomes were reported: intercultural competence and the value of inappropriacy, AUW students’ diverse cultural backgrounds and complex identities, a reduction of prejudice against the Global South, disapproval of UTokyo students and collectivism, UTokyo students’ identity and extant dichotomies, and the development of friendships through in-person communication. These outcomes revealed the UTokyo students’ substantial reflections on themselves and their AUW peers.

This study’s findings revealed several tendencies regarding UTokyo students’ perceptions. First, intergroup interactions have proven crucial not only to the reduction of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Kite et al., 2022; Malu, 2025) but

also to the successful implementation of in-person intercultural collaborative learning programs, as AUW students inspired and enlightened UTokyo students. This was exemplified by the first-person narrative of the female UTokyo student, who realized her taken-for-granted freedom to choose a boyfriend. Obviously, such “girl talk” requires an intimate friendship (Pehar et al., 2024), which is unlikely to be formed through the online summer program. Spending substantial amounts of time together, the UTokyo students could immerse themselves in face-to-face communication with their AUW peers and express themselves frankly. This finding corroborates the fact that the avoidance effect of intergroup contact (Meleady & Forder, 2018) was not present in this intercultural collaborative learning setting.

Second, attentiveness to outgroups and an inclination to critically reflect on ingroups were observed. As reviewed earlier, short-term overseas programs conducted by Global North universities in the Global South risk portraying people in the latter region as exotic others (Saidi, 2024) and illegitimate knowledge producers (Lumb, 2023). This is particularly concerning when students from the Global North visit their countries’ former colonies in the Global South (Appel et al., 2017; Sharpe, 2015). Transcending such consequences, UTokyo students regarded their AUW peers as highly motivated and hardworking individuals committed to improving the world. UTokyo students were impressed by AUW students’ passion for and loyalty to society without projecting inferiority onto their AUW peers. Notwithstanding the ubiquitous recognition of UTokyo as a top institution in Japan and Asia (Ishikawa, 2021; Yonezawa, 2021), there is no hierarchical relationship between university students. This has critical implications for equitable partnerships between Global South and North universities (Jotia et al., 2020). Bottom-up student-led approaches to the Global South–North partnership are highly recommended.

Third, close communication between UTokyo and AUW students was thought-provoking but not smooth. As illustrated by the quoted essay and interview excerpts, UTokyo students were often stuck in awkward silence, unable to respond swiftly, and lost for words. The predominant literature on intercultural competence, which underscores the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively (Dai & Feng, 2024; Deardorff, 2006; Wiseman, 2003), risks myopically judging UTokyo students to be interculturally incompetent, labeling communicative challenges they encountered to be not the “desired outcomes” (Deardorff, 2006). This judgment is valid in the short run; however, UTokyo students’ reflections demonstrate that ineffective and inappropriate instances of communication with AUW students represented learning-rich experiences. UTokyo students increased their awareness of unfairness, the plurality of ethnic identities, negative stereotypes of the Global South, their own privilege, and Japan’s colonial legacies. Arguably, the value of face-to-face intergroup interactions lies in the experience of ‘screwing up’ such communication.

Pedagogical Implications

On the basis of these findings, this study recommends that educational practitioners provide participants in intercultural collaborative learning with adequate opportunities to communicate with their outgroup peers. This enables them to build trust in each other and, hence, talk about personal and sensitive subjects such as their ethnic identities. In addition, practitioners who conduct short-term programs should not rush to develop learners' ability to communicate appropriately and effectively. Allowing learners to make mistakes and discover the meaning of their experiences encouraged them from different cultural backgrounds to develop rapport and eventually contributed to an equitable partnership between Global South and North universities. If practitioners, as well as policymakers and curriculum designers, regard enriching intergroup communications as vital to an educational exchange between the Global South and North, an in-person format is undoubtedly recommended. This is because the underdeveloped technological infrastructure of the Global South is likely to hinder online communication. Removing possible obstacles to face-to-face intergroup interactions (e.g., distance and time differences) is the foremost step that universities, their staff in charge of curricula, and policymakers should take for students to act as key players in building equal Global South–North partnerships.

Theoretical Implications

The reported findings complicate the accepted understanding of intercultural competence by questioning what the “desired outcomes” (Deardorff, 2006) of intercultural collaborative learning are and who can legitimately define the desirability of said results. From the perspective of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), this analysis revealed that UTokyo students enhanced their understanding of outgroup members through reported communication challenges. With interpretivism as a premise, the author interprets communicative challenges as rich learning experiences. However, this interpretation may disagree with that of the UTokyo students because of the negative tone of their descriptions. Thus, collectivists, who value harmonious relationships (Dai & Chen, 2015; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Takai & Ota, 1994; Yum, 2012), consider communicative failure undesirable. Ultimately, it is crucial to specify a research paradigm for scientifically valid evaluation of learning outcomes. The findings of this research would have been different if it had been designed according to the framework of a phenomenology that suspended the researcher's own opinions in the spirit of bracketing.

Limitations and Prospects

Because this study focused on Global North students' perceived learning outcomes, exploring Global South students' perceptions is recommended for

future research. In particular, perceptions of Global North cultures, which constitute a lacuna in UTokyo students' essays, need to be investigated from the perspective of the Global South. Additionally, this study could not formally investigate how UTokyo students shaped their post-program experiences, despite anecdotal evidence that the program served as a springboard for new challenges, such as volunteering in the Global South. Therefore, longitudinal studies of students' post-program development are recommended.

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Author bio

SHO SHIMOYAMADA, PhD, is a project lecturer at the Center for Global Education at the University of Tokyo in Japan. His major research interests lie in short-term joint programs with overseas universities and in the development of students' global outlook. Email: shoshim@g.ecc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

APPENDIX

Post-program questionnaire administered to UTokyo students who participated in an online summer exchange course with AUW

1. Choose three items from below that you were most satisfied with.
Lectures on gender and society; lectures on visual ethnography; communication with AUW students; group work (filmmaking with fellow students); and class vibration
2. Why did you choose these three items in the previous question?
3. Please write about anything NOT listed above that you were satisfied with.
4. Choose items or “none” from below that you feel need improvements.
Lectures on gender and society; lectures on visual ethnography; communication with AUW students; group work (filmmaking with fellow students); and class vibration
5. Why did you choose these items in the previous question?
6. To what degree are you satisfied with the program fee?
Very satisfied; satisfied; dissatisfied; very dissatisfied
7. Please provide reasons why you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the program fee.
8. When is your ideal application period for a summer program?
December to January; January to February; February to March; March to April; April to mid-May
9. If you participate in the summer program in 2023, which lecture format are you interested in?
10. What kinds of topics are you interested in if you join the program again in the future?
In person; online (live); online (on-demand); online (either live or on-demand)