

# Investigating the Impact of Hybrid EMI on Japanese University Students' Language Ability and Learner Interest in a 'Cool Japan' Course: A Pilot Study with International and Japanese Students

Darlene Yamauchi\*

Keywords: Hybrid English Medium Instruction(EMI), Cool Japan, Content-Based Instruction (CBI)

## Abstract

This research investigates the impact of domestically delivered hybrid English Medium Instruction (EMI) lectures on Japanese university students' perceived language learning interest in the "Cool Japan" course. The study includes a pilot EMI lecture class with 56 students, comprising Japanese and English-speaking international exchange students at a Tokyo-based university. The study aims to explore the students' perceptions regarding both language and content learning outcomes. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather data. The surveys gather information on students' perceived their interest in the course while the interviews delve deeper into their experiences and perspectives. The findings highlight the positive influence of EMI on Japanese students' language learning interest as well as an overall increased interest in the course content with the inclusion of International students. The study contributes to the existing literature on EMI by providing insights into the specific context of the "Cool Japan" course and the benefits of incorporating international students. These findings have implications for curriculum design and instructional practices in Japanese tertiary education settings, emphasizing the importance of EMI for enhancing language learning outcomes and fostering learner engagement.

## Introduction

English Medium Instruction (EMI) is an instructional approach that has gained significant attention in the Japanese tertiary education context. It involves delivering academic courses in English as the medium of instruction, even in non-language-related disciplines (Dafouz & Smit, 2016; Kırkgöz, 2019). EMI has become increasingly popular in Japanese universities as a means to

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\* 准教授／英語教育

enhance students' English language proficiency, academic skills, and global competencies. Furthermore, EMI aligns with the increasing emphasis on content-based language learning approaches (Galloway & Rose, 2021). Research has shown that integrating language instruction with meaningful and relevant content enhances language acquisition (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). By delivering subject courses in English, EMI facilitates language and content integration, allowing students to develop disciplinary knowledge and language skills simultaneously.

Although there have been studies investigating the effectiveness of combining EMI and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodologies, there is a need for research specifically focusing on Japanese university students (Kushida, 2019). This research aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of domestically delivered hybrid EMI lectures on Japanese university students' perceived language learning interest having successfully completed a course titled "Cool Japan". While EMI has shown promise in enhancing students' language skills and intercultural competencies, further research is indicated to explore its effectiveness when delivered domestically, in the Japanese context.

This study will further investigate the impact of a Hybrid EMI course delivered on Japanese university students' perceived language learning interest. Specifically, the study explores the students' perceptions regarding language and content learning outcomes, as well as their interest in the "Cool Japan" course with findings will be presented and analyzed in relation to the existing literature on EMI and its impact on language learning outcomes as well as learner engagement, and overall learner interest in this unique EMI course. The research methodology employed in this study specifically a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews will be explained. Subsequently, the study's context will be outlined, an EMI lecture class with 56 students, comprising both Japanese and English-speaking international exchange students at a Tokyo-based university. The positive influence of hybrid EMI on Japanese students' language learning interest is highlighted. Additionally, the implications for language education and recommendations for future research will be discussed to further enhance understanding and support the potential implementation of hybrid EMI in Japanese universities.

## **Literature Review**

### **EMI in the Japanese Tertiary Context**

EMI has become a prominent educational approach in Japanese tertiary institutions, with its focus on bolstering students' language proficiency and academic competencies (Kirkpatrick, 2020; Tajino & Tajino, 2021). EMI involves delivering academic courses in English, even within non-language related fields, garnering significant attention for its potential language learning benefits

and global competency development. The Japanese tertiary education landscape accentuates the significance of EMI due to the growing importance of English language proficiency in a globalized world (Takahashi, 2018).

EMI aligns with other content-based language learning approaches that emphasize the integration of language with relevant content, enhancing the effectiveness of language acquisition (Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2019; Tajino & Tajino, 2021). By teaching subject courses in English, EMI facilitates the simultaneous development of disciplinary knowledge and language skills, promoting learner-centered, communicative language learning (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2017). Beyond language learning, EMI offers students access to a broader array of academic resources, including scholarly articles and textbooks in English (Takahashi, 2018). Exposure to authentic English materials modified to suit local competences may be viewed as enhancing research and information literacy skills, as well as the ability to critically evaluate academic content that is (Fortanet-Gómez & Raisanen, 2019; Pinner, 2016).

In the Japanese context, EMI contributes to the internationalization of higher education by attracting international students and fostering collaborations with foreign universities (Kirkpatrick, 2020; Tajino & Tajino, 2021). This multicultural environment enhances students' intercultural competence, global awareness, and empathy, preparing them for an interconnected world (Doiz et al., 2014). Additionally, EMI promotes academic mobility and exchange opportunities, enabling Japanese students who have experienced EMI to pursue study abroad programs, internships, or research opportunities overseas (Takahashi, 2018). EMI in Japanese tertiary education plays a vital role in enhancing language skills, content-based learning, access to global resources, internationalization, and academic mobility (Galloway & Rose, 2021). It aligns with the increasing emphasis on integrated language learning, preparing students for success in a globalized academic and professional landscape.

The relationship between EMI and CLIL is a compelling topic in language education research (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). EMI primarily employs English as the medium of instruction in content instruction, while CLIL emphasizes merging language and content learning (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). In English language teaching a synthesis of these methods can create a hybrid EMI approach that combines language instruction with subject-specific content, simultaneously improving language proficiency and content comprehension (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2017). The integration of language and content offers students authentic and meaningful learning experiences, fostering deeper engagement with the subject matter and enhancing language acquisition (Coyle et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2019). Furthermore, EMI encourages interdisciplinary connections and cultivates critical thinking skills. Students analyze and synthesize information from various disciplines, promoting a comprehensive grasp of complex concepts. They also engage with peers

from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, enhancing intercultural competence and global awareness.

In the Japanese tertiary context, a study by Kikuchi and Sato (2018) explored the effectiveness of an EMI course in enhancing students' language skills and content understanding. The results demonstrated a positive impact on language learning outcomes and content comprehension. However, research involving Japanese university students in this area is limited. The incorporation of "Cool Japan" content, such as anime, manga, and music, within hybrid EMI instruction enhances authenticity (Pinner, 2016). These materials offer real-life language usage and cultural insights, fostering cultural understanding (Brown & Yamashita, 2018). Moreover, "Cool Japan" content promotes intercultural competence by exposing students to diverse cultural perspectives, facilitating empathy, and bridging cultural gaps (Itakura & Kawai, 2019). Engagement with popular culture elements like anime, manga, and J-pop aids students in gaining a deeper understanding of Japanese culture, enabling effective cross-cultural communication (Tateyama, Sakui, & Adachi, 2019).

### **Research Question**

Although there have been a number of studies suggesting that integrating popular culture elements enhances students' understanding of Japanese culture and prepares them for intercultural communication in today's globalized world, there are, however, gaps in the existing literature that require further research leading to the following research question:

"To what extent will Japanese university students' perceived language learning interest be affected by the participation in a domestically delivered hybrid EMI lecture combining international students and Japanese students?"

### **Context and Methodology**

The current research was conducted in a Hybrid English Medium Instruction(EMI) lecture class with a total enrollment of 56 students in a small private university in Tokyo. The class titled "Cool Japan" an elective one-semester class held during the Fall term consisted of International exchange students who were native English or near-native English speakers (n=23) and second or third-year Japanese students with TOEIC scores ranging from 600 to 800 (n=33). The 23 international students were enrolled in a study abroad program at the university for the Fall term. The class was held over a three-month period in the Fall semester with a total of 15 lectures. The course content was related to the subject of "Cool Japan" with commonly researched topics such as local foods, "cool" tourist destinations and animation (Craig, 2020). Although a lecture class, the main mode of instruction and learning for this class was task-based instruction with Project

Based Learning (PBL) utilized. The reasoning for this approach was that PBL encourages students to learn by actively engaging in authentic and personally meaningful projects (Almulla, 2020). The students worked with the same group members to complete three different projects: two oral and one poster presentation on themes chosen by students related to the concept of "Cool Japan".

The research methodology employed in this study includes an explanatory sequential mixed methods study combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gather data from a sample of Japanese students enrolled in a pilot Hybrid EMI lecture class (n=33). In the quantitative phase, a self-reporting survey was utilized to collect information on students' perceived language learning ability and their interest in this unique course. The qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with three purposefully selected individuals was then utilized to explain as well as provide deeper insights into the students' experiences and perspectives.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Phase One Procedures**

In an effort to ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire designed to answer the research question "To what extent will Japanese university students' perceived language learning interest be affected by participation in a domestically delivered hybrid EMI lecture combining international students and Japanese students?", the instrument was first piloted. By conducting the pilot test and incorporating participant feedback, the questionnaire for the main study was refined, ensuring its validity and reliability, (Dörnyei, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The pilot test aimed to identify any potential issues, improve the clarity and quality of the questionnaire, and gather valuable feedback from a small group of participants.

Participants for the pilot test were selected to resemble the target population of the study, which consisted of Japanese university students with an interest in "Cool Japan" content. To enhance the representativeness of the pilot group, participants were recruited from the same university or a similar educational setting, in this case, six students from the instructor's seminar (Smith et al., 2018). Prior to the pilot test, clear instructions were provided to participants, emphasizing the importance of honest and thoughtful responses. Participants were informed that their feedback would be utilized to enhance the questionnaire and that their responses would be kept confidential, ensuring their privacy and anonymity (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

During the pilot process the questionnaire was distributed to the participants. They were requested to carefully read and respond to each question, taking sufficient time to provide accurate and thoughtful answers. This allowed participants to engage with the questionnaire and provide meaningful feedback (Dörnyei, 2007). Following the completion of the questionnaires, the instructor collected them from the pilot participants. Additionally, to gain deeper insights and

qualitative feedback, follow-up interviews with the six students were conducted. These discussions aimed to explore the clarity, relevance, and overall effectiveness of the questionnaire. Any difficulties or confusion expressed by the participants while completing the questionnaire were also noted (Bryman, 2016).

The collected responses and feedback from the pilot participants were thoroughly reviewed, analyzed, and assessed for the clarity and understandability of each question to identify any potential issues or areas for improvement moving forward. Participants' feedback played a crucial role in evaluating the questionnaire's effectiveness in addressing the research question and its relevance to the target population (Creswell, 2014). Based on the analysis and evaluation of the feedback, necessary revisions were made to enhance the clarity and quality of the questionnaire. At this point the decision to make the questionnaire bilingual(English and Japanese)was made in order for ease of understanding. The revised questionnaire aimed to address the issues and suggestions highlighted by the pilot participants, ensuring that their valuable feedback was integrated (Denscombe, 2014).

The process of administering the online questionnaire to 33 Japanese students at the completion of a 15-session "Cool Japan" hybrid EMI course was conducted using Microsoft Forms in a team only accessible to the students in the class. The revised questionnaire was created using Microsoft Forms, with questions and response options available in English and Japanese to cater to participants' language preferences with clear communication provided in terms of informing participants about the questionnaire's purpose, relevance to the course, and instructions for accessing it through Microsoft Forms.

Participants provided informed consent through an online consent process that outlined the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and any associated risks or benefits written at the beginning of the questionnaire(Hewson, 2019). The questionnaire was distributed via Microsoft Forms to the class's team, ensuring access only to students in the course. Participants received an access link to complete it at their convenience. Additionally, the questionnaire was not timed, allowing thoughtful responses without feeling rushed. The instructor monitored the participants' progress and addressed any issues or concerns promptly to ensure a smooth completion of the questionnaire. Completed questionnaire responses were automatically collected and recorded by Microsoft Forms, capturing participants' answers, comments, and open-ended responses securely within the platform.

Measures were taken to safeguard participants' data privacy and confidentiality using Microsoft Forms' security features. Anonymity was maintained through unique code, to eliminate personal identifying information(Huff & Kline, 2015). Furthermore, by utilizing Microsoft Forms in a team accessible only to the students in the class, the online questionnaire was successfully administered, ensuring convenience for participants and facilitating efficient data collection for

analysis and reporting.

The investigation aimed to elucidate the impact of domestically delivered hybrid English Medium Instruction (EMI) lectures, on Japanese university students' perceived language learning interest, in a learning context with international and Japanese students in the same class. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, integrating quantitative data from a self-reporting questionnaire with qualitative insights from interviews with three purposefully selected students from the research sample. This data was employed to aid in addressing the research question: "To what extent does participation in domestically delivered hybrid EMI lectures combining international and Japanese students affect Japanese university students' perceived language learning interest?"

Quantitative analysis revealed compelling evidence of the positive influence of domestically delivered hybrid EMI lectures on Japanese university students' language learning interest and overall course content interest. Among surveyed students, 31 out of 33 (94%) expressed very high interest in learning English after participating in these lectures. This is noteworthy as before taking the "Cool Japan" course, only 13 out of 33 students (39%) reported very high interest in learning English). These results underscore the perceived impact of EMI lectures on students' motivation to learn English (see Figure 1).

With regard to the impact on students' interest of the "Cool Japan" course content, 24 out of 33 students (73%) reported a significant increase in interest, while 9 students (12.1%) reported a moderate increase. None of the students reported no change or a decrease in their interest. This may suggest that EMI lectures not only enhance language learning but also made course content more engaging for the majority of students. Moreover, students' overall satisfaction with the Cool Japan course was highly positive, with 31 out of 33 students (94%) expressing strong satisfaction, and the remaining 2 students (6%) reporting satisfaction. These findings may be viewed as highlighting the overall success of the "Cool Japan" Course in terms of student satisfaction.

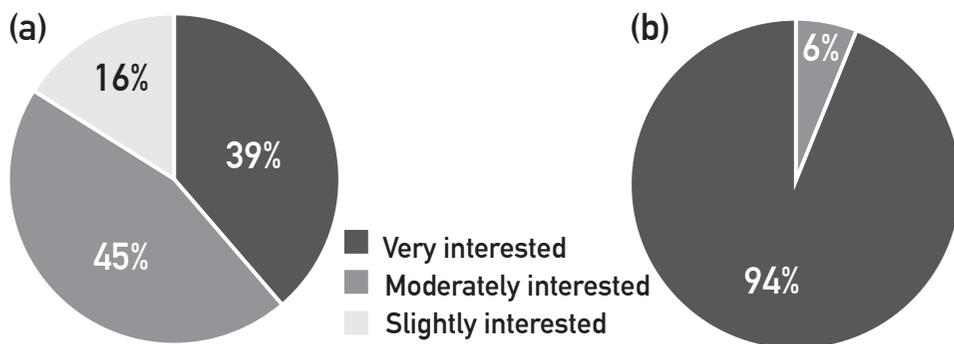


Figure 1 Interest in English Language Study before(a) and after(b) lecture

Finally, all 33 students recommended the course to future classmates, with 29 students (88%) “Highly Recommending” it and 4 students (12%) “Recommending” it. Notably, no students gave negative recommendations. This favorable feedback underscores the potential endorsement for the course’s continuation in future years and emphasizes the advantages of integrating international perspectives and language instruction into the “Cool Japan” course.

In summary, these quantitative findings collectively emphasize the positive impact of the EMI course on language learning interest and provide insights into students’ perceptions. However, it is important to acknowledge that the data relies on self-reported responses, which can be subjective. To offer a more comprehensive perspective, complementary qualitative analysis through interviews with three participating students was conducted, providing deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions regarding the impact of EMI on language learning and course interest.

### **Phase Two Procedures**

The second phase of this explanatory mixed methods study involved semi-structured interviews with three purposefully selected participants from the quantitative phase. These interviews aimed to provide in-depth insights and were conducted following an intrinsic case study approach (Stake, 1995), focusing on localized mixed methods to inform local educational practice. The resulting data were triangulated for increased robustness. A two-stage case selection process was used, drawing from the initial quantitative sample and selecting interviewees based on their responses to open-ended questions from the first-phase questionnaires. The primary research question remained focused on the impact of domestically delivered hybrid EMI lectures, combining international students and Japanese students, on Japanese university students’ perceived language learning interest.

The interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participating students and were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently coded (Saldana, 2021). All interviews were conducted in English. Each interviewee was a 21-year-old third-year student with comparable TOEIC scores ranging from 606 to 677 or CEFR upper B1 level. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were assigned.

Data analysis in this phase involved a hybrid approach, combining deductive and inductive coding methods. Deductively, content analysis revealed three main themes: learner confidence, interest, and perceived language improvement within the sample. Additionally, inductive coding was conducted to remain open to identifying novel themes (Saldana, 2021). This approach allowed for comprehensive exploration of the research question while ensuring flexibility in data gathering and analysis.

**Table 1** Participant Demographic Data

Student (pseudonym)	Age	Nationality	Major Study	Year of Study	Most Recent TOEIC Score	CEFR	Previous EMI Experience
1(Sari)	20	Japanese	Foreign Studies	3 <sup>rd</sup>	671	B1	No
2(Kento)	20	Japanese	Foreign Studies	3 <sup>rd</sup>	606	B1	No
3(Maki)	20	Japanese	Foreign Studies	3 <sup>rd</sup>	677	B1	Limited

Three students participated in the second phase of the study each was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality (See Table 1). Sari, 20 years old and a second-year student, had a TOEIC score of 671 and no prior experience with English Medium Instruction (EMI). Kento, a 20-year-old third-year student, scored 606 in TOEIC and also had no prior EMI exposure. Maki, another 20-year-old third-year student, scored 677 in TOEIC and, like the others, had no previous encounter with EMI instruction although she mentioned that she had a native English-speaking instructor for her English classes in high school.

In order to comprehensively assess the impact of domestically administered hybrid English Medium Instruction (EMI) lectures integrated into the “Cool Japan” curriculum, insights gathered from in-depth interviews with three student representatives described previously: Sari, Kento, and Maki.(pseudonyms) were utilized as these insights may add a valuable dimension to this analysis(Cresswell, 2014).

### Language Learning Interest

Examining the effect on perceived language learning interest Sari, a second-year student with no prior EMI experience, commented that in her opinion EMI lectures offered an authentic immersive English environment stating:

*“The EMI lectures encouraged me to actively participate and communicate in English. I felt like I was in a foreign university sometimes because everything we did was in English and many of the students weren’t Japanese so I felt natural speaking English and I think it improved my English.”(Sari)*

Kento, a third-year student also reiterated the importance of international students’ presence as a motivating factor as well as adding to the authentic, real-world linguistic environment with the following comment:

*“Having foreign students who couldn’t speak any Japanese at all in our class made us speak*

*English more and more. Everyone's accents were different so I had to work hard to understand sometimes but it was exciting and I think that it gives me confidence to speak English more freely"* (Kento)

These student comments and observations align with the quantitative data, reporting that 84.8% of respondents noted a significant increase in their inclination to speak English, perhaps underscoring the role and benefit of genuine language exposure EMI courses provide (Coyle et al., 2010; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2017). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with research demonstrating a significant increase in students' inclination to speak English as a result of the context of increased language exposure and the necessity to communicate only in English in EMI courses (Coyle et al., 2010; Sahan & Rose, 2021). This may be viewed as further supporting the concept that EMI courses indeed contribute to enhanced language skills.

### **Course Content Interest**

The viewpoints expressed by all three students completing the "Cool Japan" course strongly resonated with the quantitative findings that 87.9% of students reported an increase in content interest as well as research suggesting that EMI's integration of language and subject matter fosters active engagement and a deeper understanding of the content (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2017). Specifically, Exposure to international perspectives and discussions about Japanese culture can enrich students' learning experiences (Doiz et al., 2014).

For example, Sari commented about her curiosity and surprise about what international students knew about Japan and how it affected her learning interest with the comment:

*"The international students seemed to know a lot about Japan. I was really surprised and I think it made me want to learn more about Japanese culture. I ended up studying more than I thought I would..."* (Sari)

Similarly, Kento commented on how the knowledge and inquisitive of the international students influenced his interest in the course content with the observation:

*"The international students had lots of good ideas in our discussions. They knew a lot more about Japan and if they didn't they would ask us questions so we had to do a lot of research look up information in the library and online of course in English ! It was a little difficult at first reading English information but the class was in English so it became natural for us and it was like a friendly challenge with the international students to find something new."* (Kento)

The third student interviewed, Maki reaffirmed the stimulating global contributions of the course and international students with the following comment:

*"Talking to international students gave me new ideas when we worked together on group projects. They really liked Japanese culture and knew a lot about it more than me actually. That got me*

*interested to learn more. In the class it was like seeing Japanese culture from all around the world, and I wanted to know more.” (Maki)*

These comments may be perceived as agreeing with the argument that the benefits of EMI extend beyond language learning. Researchers (Lei & Hu, 2014; Smit & Dafouz, 2012) comment that the implementation of English as the medium of instruction enables students to access a wider range of academic resources, including scholarly articles, textbooks, and online materials available in English. Furthermore, exposure to authentic English materials is theorized to enhance students' research and information literacy skills, as well as their ability to navigate and critically evaluate academic content as commented in these student interviews (Pinner, 2016).

### **Course Recommendation**

The feedback from Kento, Maki, and Sari strongly supports the quantitative data showing that all students recommend the course with 88% of students highly recommending the course to their future classmates. The interviewed students all found the course content interesting and highlighted the exciting aspect of having international students in the class.

Kento, a third-year student, commented on the personal benefits of group work with the international students with the following:

*“I really liked this course, and I think my future classmates would too. It was interesting, and having friends from other countries made it even cooler, and studying was a lot more fun with them, especially the group projects. I'd tell my classmates to take this course for sure.” (Kento)*

Maki, also a third-year student, also shared her positive experience, as well as the linguistic challenges stating:

*“I had a great time in this class. Learning about 'Cool Japan' was fun, and the international students made it even more interesting. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding everyone's English but the international students were very kind and I'd definitely tell my future classmates to give it a try and not to worry about making mistakes because that is how you learn.” (Maki)*

Sari, a second-year student, described the class as “awesome!” and added:

*“I'd say to my future classmates, 'Go for it! The stuff we learned was cool, and having friends from other countries made it even better. After taking this course have more confidence in speaking English and I am interested in studying abroad.” (Sari)*

The interviewed students' comments are found to resonate with research stating that EMI promotes academic mobility and exchange opportunities, enabling students who have experienced EMI to pursue study abroad programs, internships, or research opportunities overseas, leveraging their language skills and academic confidence in cross-cultural environments (Kırkgöz, 201 ;Lei & Hu, 2014; Smit & Dafouz, 2012). Furthermore the strong recommendation of the course to future

classmates by the interviewed students appear also to be in agreement with the positive outcomes found to be associated with EMI (Sahan& Rose, 2021). Research has indicated that students often value EMI experiences and consider them beneficial for language learning, intercultural competence, and content understanding (Doiz et al., 2014). Research has also demonstrated that the presence of international students and the dynamic classroom environment it promotes can make EMI courses appealing to students as appeared to be the situation shown in this hybrid EMI course(Doiz et.al, 2014; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2017).

### **Conclusion and Further Implications**

The present study's findings derived from an explanatory sequential mixed methods design provided evidence as well as a comprehensive understanding of how EMI lectures can positively influence language acquisition interests, course content engagement, overall course satisfaction, and ultimately endorsements for the continuation of the "Cool Japan" academic program. The qualitative findings underscore the pedagogical advantages of incorporating international perspectives and fostering cross-cultural exchange within Japanese higher education and the significant impact of domestically delivered hybrid EMI classes on Japanese university students' perceived language ability. This illustrated how the integration of international and Japanese students resulted in increased learner interest in studying English and "Cool Japan," along with improvements in students' perceived language skills, as well as significant increase in learner confidence in this course. The findings in this pilot study appeared to align with previous research on the benefits of meaningful language interactions, content-based instruction, and the incorporation of international perspectives in language learning settings. Incorporating "Cool Japan" content in hybrid EMI instruction allows students to develop intercultural competence while simultaneously improving language proficiency and content comprehension. This integrated approach has the propensity to enhance students' overall learning experience, aligning with the goal of fostering global competence.

The study's limitations, namely a relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reporting warrant further research with larger and more diverse samples for generalizability. Future studies should consider incorporating more objective measures, such as language proficiency tests, to triangulate the findings and provide a more comprehensive objective, assessment of students' language ability. Despite these limitations, the findings of the present study highlighted the importance of integrating international perspectives, and meaningful language interactions, as well as the benefits of content-based instruction in language learning settings. providing an incentive for a continuation of this hybrid EMI course in the future.

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(2023.9.23 受稿, 2023.11.13 受理)