
Helping Students to Reflect on Their Own Intercultural Learning

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ABSTRACT: This study reports on a qualitative multiple case study evaluating an innovation to enhance student reflection on intercultural learning at a Japanese university. The innovation involved students writing letters to themselves at the start of a 15-week programme and revisiting them at the end. A content analysis using Kember et al.'s (2008) reflective framework compared reflections from 50 students who participated in the innovation with 50 from prior cohorts. The innovation indicated deeper reflection and reassessment of students' cultural assumptions. By emphasising individual student insights over standardised learning, the study contributes to equity-oriented, context-sensitive approaches to reflection in intercultural learning in higher education.

KEYWORDS: Reflection, critical reflection, intercultural learning, multiple-case study

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Structured reflection activities can play an important role in supporting students as they make sense of complex learning experiences, including

intercultural learning contexts. However, reflective practice can be inconsistently understood and unevenly applied in higher education (HE), with some students completing such activities in formulaic or surface-level ways. This paper investigates how a structured reflective innovation helped students to reflect on and identify their own intercultural learning in a Japanese HE setting.

Understanding Reflection

Although widely used in educational discourse, the term reflection lacks a consistent or shared definition (Kember et al., 2008). A foundational perspective from Dewey (1933) defined reflection as “the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it” (p. 6). This definition frames reflection as a purposeful process of inquiry and meaning-making, involving deliberate efforts to examine the reasoning behind one’s beliefs or knowledge. Expanding on this view, Rodgers (2002) conceptualised reflection as a deliberate meaning-making process, through which students interpret, connect, and derive understanding from prior experiences. Reflection has also been described as an internal dialogue where individuals examine their thoughts and experiences in relation to learning (Johns, 2013). This process involves both cognitive dimensions (i.e., analysing and synthesising information) and emotional dimensions, i.e., recognising and processing personal feelings, values, and experiences that shape reflective insights (Boud et al., 1985). Gray (2007) distinguishes between different levels of reflective practice, ranging from descriptive accounts to more complex and transformative processes where individuals examine deeper implications of their thoughts and actions.

Reflection also differs from self-assessment, which typically involves evaluating performance against predetermined criteria (Desjarlais & Smith, 2011). It is also differentiated from self-reflection (though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably) in that it encompasses focus on one’s own experiences and beliefs and engagement with the perspectives of others, as well as on learning materials themselves (Shaw et al., 2018). In this way, reflection involves both inward-looking introspection and an outward-looking awareness of social and contextual influences. At a deeper level, critical reflection involves questioning underlying assumptions and frameworks that shape an individual’s interpretations. As Gray (2007) explained, critical reflection involves “reassessing the way one has posed problems and one’s orientation to perceiving, believing and acting” (pp. 496–497). Rather than justifying one’s views, critical reflection requires interrogating structures that inform them. Jacoby (2014) similarly defined critical reflection as “the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one’s experiences within a broad context of issues and content knowledge” (p. 26), emphasising the importance of situating personal insights within wider social, cultural, and educational contexts.

Relatedly, Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning incorporates critical reflection as a component of personal change, where learning is understood as a process of becoming aware of and revising one's assumptions. Transformative learning, in this view, occurs through subjective reframing (critically examining personal beliefs) and objective reframing (engaging critically with external materials, such as learning content). Cranton (2016) complements Mezirow's (1997) model by offering concrete strategies for using structured reflection to support students in examining and revising assumptions and internalised biases. These biases are often unconscious and shaped by individuals' cultural, social, or educational environments. They may include common stereotypes or deficit views of other groups, which can influence how individuals perceive and interact with differences. Facilitating transformative learning, therefore, involves creating space for personal insight and designing tasks that promote deeper questioning of one's beliefs. This includes encouraging students to identify possible origins for their assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and recognise the socio-cultural influences that shape their thinking.

Reflection in Educational Practice

Such reflective practices are especially relevant in intercultural learning, where encouraging students to examine existing perspectives towards themselves and others can support deeper engagement with content and help them identify their own learning (Nardon, 2019). These opportunities may support an individualised approach to intercultural learning which recognises students' unique experiences, perspectives, and processes (Feng, 2016). While the term "intercultural learning" can be defined in various ways, in this paper it is broadly understood as processes by which individuals develop skills, attitudes, and knowledge for effective engagement with people from different cultural backgrounds, grounded in mutual respect and understanding (e.g., Byram, 1997). This perspective extends on acquiring knowledge about other cultures and instead emphasises a learning process that challenges students to critically reflect on their own assumptions, behaviours, and experiences (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2011). In this way, reflection becomes central to intercultural learning by encouraging students to examine how they understand both themselves and others.

In educational practice, reflection can involve deliberately pausing to consider the meaning of learning events and how they affect the individual (e.g., Raelin, 2002). One key concern in using reflection in education is whether and how it can or should be assessed, particularly because reflective writing often represents incomplete or evolving aspects of deeper learning. This is especially relevant for intercultural learning, where reflection may be less about measuring outcomes according to standardised definitions of intercultural competence and more about students exploring their own personal experiences and evolving understandings. The individualised and often non-linear nature of intercultural

learning makes it difficult to capture through conventional assessment tools, which can overlook the personal and contextual dimensions of learning. When reflection is treated as a graded task, students may prioritise responses that align with assessment criteria rather than engage in genuine introspection (Iyer, 2016). This tension is heightened when rubrics are used, as they may reduce complex, subjective learning to fixed criteria and limit students' authentic expression. In some cases, this may constrain students' willingness to share personal insights, encouraging conformity over exploration. Furthermore, rubrics developed within one educational system may be misapplied across contexts, where assumptions about learning and reflection differ (Tight, 2023).

There are also practical concerns in teaching and assessing reflection in how the time required to engage in reflection, combined with other study pressures, can lead students to produce superficial responses, such as listing completed activities without demonstrating deeper engagement (Mitchell, 2008). Furthermore, when students perceive reflection as an additional requirement and not as integral to learning, they may prioritise task completion over introspection (Sekita et al., 2024; Tight, 2023). Tight (2023) also noted that some students may progress effectively without engaging in reflective practices at all, raising questions about the necessity and impact of reflection on learning outcomes. Ethical concerns should also be considered, as asking students to share personal reflections for assessment may feel intrusive, particularly when the content involves sensitive or identity-related intercultural experiences. These issues can be observed in various international HE contexts, including Japanese universities, where reflective tasks are sometimes treated as formalities linked to assessment or as exercises in self-critique, rather than as opportunities for transformative learning (e.g., Hara, 2021; Yabukoshi, 2020). When reflection becomes procedural or performative, students may also feel discouraged from engaging in deeper introspection or from critically examining their intercultural learning experiences. Thus, there is a need to explore approaches that personalise reflection and support students in recognising and articulating their own learning processes in meaningful ways, particularly in intercultural contexts.

Conceptual Framework: Researching Reflection

To address these theoretical and practical understandings and concerns, Kember et al. (2008) developed a reflective framework to categorise levels of reflective practice, which they assert is pedagogically grounded, flexible enough to capture varied levels of student engagement, and applicable across diverse assessment contexts (see Figure 1).

Habitual Action/non-reflection	Repetition of learned material without (evidence of) deeper engagement
Understanding	Grasping concepts but without (evidence of) personal connections
Reflection	Integration of personal experiences with learning
Critical Reflection	Reassessment of personal beliefs and assumptions

Figure 1

Four Categories of Reflection Adapted from Kember et al. (2008)

According to the framework's authors, "habitual action/non-reflection" refers to instances where students repeat learned material without demonstrating deeper engagement. For example, they may locate information on a set topic and include it in a reflective text without critically engaging with the content or making personal connections. This may result in paraphrased or summarised material that lacks insight or meaning. The next category, "understanding," is evident when students grasp theoretical concepts but do not explicitly relate them to their own experiences. "Reflection" involves the integration of personal experiences with learning, where students show awareness of how new insights connect to prior knowledge or beliefs. The final category, "critical reflection," draws on Mezirow's (1997) theory of transformative learning and entails reassessing one's beliefs and values, and recognising how personal experiences and social contexts shape assumptions and behaviours. While the categories of "reflection" and "critical reflection" suggest deeper levels of learning, it is important to acknowledge that students' written reflective texts may only offer partial or indirect evidence of these processes. Furthermore, the absence of such evidence should not be assumed to indicate an absence of reflection.

The Kember et al. (2008) framework has been applied to examine students' work in a number of studies. Bell et al. (2011) used the four-category model to code student journals, finding that 65% of entries were "non-reflection" and 35% "reflection." Harland and Wondra (2011) applied the framework to reflections from 67 teacher candidates in the US, coding each by the highest level of reflection. Their four coders achieved 100% interrater reliability, demonstrating consistency in applications of the framework. In Mexico, Roux et al. (2012) analysed 75 texts from trainee English teachers and found none showed "critical reflection," only two were "reflective," while 44% showed "understanding" and 51% were "non-reflective." Tahmasbi et al. (2022) assessed reflective journals from 80 language learners and found that structured reflection promoted reflective learning. Similarly, Radović et al. (2022) showed that collaborative reflection, i.e., sharing, reading, and discussing peer reflections, enhanced reflective engagement. Collectively, these studies support the applicability of Kember et al.'s (2008) reflective framework in varied educational contexts in offering a structured, suggestive understanding of reflective depth.

Statement of Aims

This study explores how a structured reflective activity can support students in identifying and articulating their intercultural learning. Students wrote a letter to themselves at the start of a 15-week course and revisited it at the end to reflect on their learning. This two-stage process aimed to reveal to students themselves how their thinking developed over time. By returning to earlier reflections, students could revisit assumptions, notice shifts in perspective, and confront contradictions or tensions. The aim was to move beyond surface-level observation toward transformative insight. To analyse the reflections, the study adopted Kember et al.'s (2008) four-category framework of reflective thinking. Although not specific to intercultural learning, the framework's content-neutral, non-prescriptive nature made it well suited for examining varied levels of reflective engagement. It enabled analysis of how students engaged in personally meaningful reflection, regardless of how they defined intercultural learning. In this way, the study recognises students' interpretations as personal, contextual, and not easily standardised. It also aligns with multicultural education by centering student voice, fostering reflective self-awareness, and supporting inclusive pedagogies that promote equitable engagement.

Methods

This section describes the educational setting, participants, and design of the reflective innovation. It begins with an overview of the course in which the innovation was implemented before providing details of the methodological approach adopted.

The Educational Context

The innovation was implemented in an elective, home-based intercultural learning programme for science and engineering students at a Japanese university. The course ran for one semester and was taught by the authors of this paper in a combination of English and Japanese. It consisted of 15 asynchronous, on-demand classes, each lasting 90 minutes, with class sizes typically around 70 students, the majority of whom were Japanese. The course was intentionally designed to offer open-ended, student-directed opportunities for reflection. Students were not directed towards any specific definition or model of intercultural learning, nor were they assessed on the content or perceived depth of their reflections. Instead, they were encouraged to engage with aspects of the course they found personally meaningful. To support this individualised approach, the grading system awarded credit for task completion, including communication

challenges, research tasks, cultural observations, quizzes, and written reflections, but not for the content or quality of those reflections.

At the university, as in other Japanese HE institutions, reflective writing is a common feature of course assignments, particularly in general education subjects (Hara, 2021). Indeed, 10% of the final grade in all courses at the university was allocated to end-of-course reflections, regardless of discipline (note that the letter-writing activity discussed here was separate from the end-of-course reflection, which followed a university-wide format). Although students were familiar with the format, consisting of a brief written response to fixed questions at the end of each course, they did not appear to use reflection to examine assumptions or personal learning processes (Sekita et al., 2024). This innovation, therefore, responded to a pattern of reflection being treated as a procedural task, often resulting in brief, task-oriented summaries shaped by perceived instructor expectations. While it is important to avoid essentialising the students in this study, certain cultural and educational norms in Japan may present challenges for critical reflection. Some students may hesitate to engage in self-evaluation or personal expression, particularly if previous educational experiences emphasised correctness and deference (Miyanaga, 2012; Okada, 2016). Egitim (2022) similarly found that Japanese students often provided brief or cautious responses in reflection tasks, highlighting tensions between earlier schooling and the expectations of HE. This may reflect how reflection can be locally understood in terms of identifying mistakes and areas for improvement rather than as the kind of critical or exploratory reflection often emphasised in non-Japanese contexts (Yabukoshi, 2020). This study, then, considers how structured yet personalised reflection tasks might support students in engaging with reflection on their own terms, while also recognising that the data reflect individual experiences rather than representing a single cultural group.

The Innovation

The reflective innovation was introduced at the start of the programme as a way for students to articulate their initial thoughts, motivations, and expectations. At the end of the course, students revisited these reflections. The design aimed to address limitations in previous course iterations, which had provided few opportunities for structured reflection. A letter-writing format was chosen for its potential to foster internal dialogue, allowing students to revisit earlier motivations in a personally meaningful way. Unlike completing two separate reflective tasks, this format invited students to respond directly to their own earlier thinking and observe how their perspectives had changed. Writing to oneself also encouraged a stronger sense of personal connection, prompting changes in thinking to feel more immediate and authentic.

Students were first given guiding questions to support the initial letter-writing process. These included: What do you expect to study in this course? What do you

hope to learn about yourself? About others? What does culture mean to you? What challenges do you anticipate facing on this intercultural learning course? Students were given time in class to write their letters, with no imposed word limit. To support equity and inclusivity, they could write in their preferred language, and the task was not graded for content or reflective depth. This approach allowed for authentic engagement, free from pressure to conform to expected intercultural positions or linguistic standards. While there are arguments that providing structure can constrain spontaneity (e.g., Prinsloo et al., 2011), structured approaches can also guide students toward deeper, more purposeful reflection. The letters were collected and stored by the teachers until the end of the programme, when they were returned to the students. Over the following week, students privately reread their letters and wrote a follow-up reflection on their learning and any changes in their perspectives. Guiding questions included: What do you find interesting about your letter? Which aspects are most significant to your personal growth? How were you feeling when you wrote it, and why? How have your perspectives on culture, others, or yourself changed (or not changed)?

Multiple Case Study Design

This study was guided by the following research question:

To what extent can a structured letter-writing innovation enhance students' reflective practices and awareness of their intercultural learning?

A qualitative, interpretive multiple case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017) was used to explore how students engaged in reflection under different conditions. The aim was to understand whether and how the innovation supported deeper reflection and helped students identify their intercultural learning in comparison to previous course iterations conducted without the structured task. Two cohorts from the same course were examined as separate cases: Case A (intervention group) comprised 50 students who completed the letter-writing activity; Case B (non-intervention group) included 50 students from a previous iteration who did not engage in the activity. The cohorts differed only in whether they participated in the letter-writing activity. Students in both classes were aged 19–21 and, by coincidence, each group included 22 females and 28 males. As noted, all were majoring in science and engineering, with English proficiency ranging from A1 to B1 on the CEFR scale. The course was an elective open to students across faculties, with approximately 98% identifying as Japanese. The primary distinction between the two groups was the timing of their course participation. The two cases were contrasted while retaining within-case detail to understand the complexity of each (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017).

Data sources for Case A included initial letters written at the start of the course (11,241 words) and reflective responses written at the end (12,983 words). For Case B, data consisted of end-of-course reflections from previous iterations of the course (10,457 words). Approximately 70% of reflections in Case A and all of

those in Case B were written in Japanese. Where needed, reflections were translated into English using the DeepL translation application. Although this provided a practical solution for the researchers to work with the data, it introduced potential limitations concerning the depth and subtlety of meaning captured in translated texts. Differences in language structure can also affect the length of translated passages and thus introduce variability between source and translated texts. The word counts above are from the final dataset in English (original English texts and translated texts). A selection of translated reflections was reviewed by a bilingual colleague proficient in Japanese and English to check for accuracy and alignment of translations with the intended meanings in the original responses. Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics review board. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of the research purpose and their right to opt out without consequence. All reflections were anonymised and securely stored, with access limited to the research team.

Analytical Procedures

All data were imported into NVivo 14 for coding and analysis. Kember et al.'s (2008) four-category scheme was used to provide an initial coding structure at the text level, based on the highest level of reflection identified, following the authors' recommendations. The first-named author was the principal analyst; however, a sample analysis of ten reflections from each cohort was conducted by the co-author to ensure consistency of interpretations. Interrater reliability at the text level was 100 percent for both groups. For deeper analysis, the reflections were then examined using qualitative content analysis at the item level, i.e., specific statements, phrases, or sections that conveyed (or were interpreted as conveying) a particular thought, idea, or observation. These were grouped into emergent subcategories and organised under the four main categories. A codebook was developed through this iterative process of engaging with the data (see Table 2 in "Results"). The co-author reviewed the codebook and selected examples, offering feedback on interpretations. A comparative analysis was then conducted across the two cases. At this stage, students' initial letters were also compared with their final reflections, focusing on how they identified and articulated their intercultural learning.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The first-named author is a teacher-researcher from the UK, based in Japan, with a UK-based education. The second-named author, based at the same institution, is from the US with a US-based educational background. Both researchers acknowledge that their backgrounds may have shaped assumptions and influenced students, including through the reflective innovation presented here. To mitigate this, the activity was intentionally designed to centre students' own

learning and awareness. The interpretive nature of this study requires close attention to researcher positionality and reflexivity, understood as critical self-awareness of how personal positioning and contextual factors shape the research process and its interpretations (Berger, 2015). This study drew on Walsh's (2003) four interrelated dimensions of reflexivity. Firstly, personal reflexivity involved recognising that the researchers' identities as long-term educators in Japan, shaped by UK and US traditions, influenced their understandings of meaningful reflection and intercultural learning. These assumptions informed how student reflections were interpreted. Interpersonal reflexivity was relevant to the researchers' dual roles as teachers and investigators. Letters were anonymised before analysis, and students were informed that the task would be assessed based only on completion. Methodological reflexivity was addressed through collaborative coding and discussion of themes, and the researchers continued to recognize their own subjectivities. Contextual reflexivity shaped the decision to use written reflections, in recognition of students' preference for written English over verbal discussion of personal or intercultural experiences. Although steps were taken to ensure transparency and consistency, it is ultimately for readers to judge how the findings may apply in other contexts and the extent to which this work is transferable.

Results

This section presents findings from a comparative case study of two cohorts: one that engaged in a structured letter-writing activity (Case A) and one that did not (Case B). Each cohort is treated as a distinct case to explore differences in the depth and nature of student reflection.

Comparing Levels of Reflection Across Cases

Table 1 presents the distribution of coded reflections across the four categories for both cases, based on the highest level of reflection interpreted in each response.

Category	Case A	Case B
Habitual Action/non-reflection	8 (16%)	19 (38%)
Understanding	12 (24%)	16 (32%)
Reflection	14 (28%)	9 (18%)
Critical Reflection	16 (32%)	6 (12%)
Total Reflections	50 (100%)	50 (100%)

Table 1

Comparison of Reflection Levels Across Two Cases

The findings revealed differences in the depth and quality of student reflections. In the “habitual action/non-reflection” category, Case A had fewer superficial responses (8) compared to Case B (19), suggesting that the structured activity helped reduce surface-level engagement. In the “understanding” category, both cases showed evidence of grasping intercultural concepts, though Case B had more instances (16 versus 12). In “reflection,” Case A had more instances (14 compared to 9), indicating that students in this case were more likely to connect course content to personal experiences and develop self-awareness. The greatest disparity appeared in “critical reflection,” with 16 reflections in Case A versus 6 in Case B. Reflections at this level included reassessment of personal beliefs, recognition of prior assumptions, and integration of new perspectives. The higher frequency in Case A suggests the structured reflective task was at least partially effective; however, the presence of superficial responses in both cases indicates that the activity did not engage all students equally.

Interpretations from Content Analysis

During the content analysis, 15 emergent themes were organised as subcategories under the main categories of the Kember et al. (2008) framework (Table 2). Brief excerpts are provided alongside each subcategory to illustrate how student reflections were categorised. These excerpts reflect broader patterns identified during analysis and were selected to highlight key themes concisely. While presented out of context, care was taken to interpret them with attention to the full reflection from which they were drawn. They are therefore illustrative of larger trends and grounded in a broader understanding of each student’s response. For more contextualisation, in the subsequent section, fuller letters and later reflections are presented and discussed by framework categories. The excerpts were extracted from all student reflections, with some reflections providing more extensive data and consequently contributing more to the overall coding. The distribution of codes for each subcategory, comparing cases A and B, is quantified on the right side of the table.

Category		Subcategory	Illustrative Data	Case A	Case B
Habitual Action/ non-reflection	1	Basic recall of information without deeper analysis.	"I attended all the sessions and completed the assignments"	15	29
	2	General descriptive language lacking personal insight.	"I learned about different cultures through self-study assignments"	17	31
	3	References to participation in activities without reflecting on their significance.	"I participated in group discussions and shared my thoughts on the topics"	21	37
	4	Emphasis on completing tasks or achieving results without personal reflection.	"I completed all units and did the homework"	12	36
	5	Writing about culture in a general or stereotypical way without deeper understanding.	"In Japan, culture values harmony, Koreans like spicy food, and Mexicans dance cheerfully"	8	21
Understanding	6	Theoretical understanding without personal connection.	"I understand that culture includes different behaviours and beliefs"	11	19
	7	Basic acknowledgment of emotions without deeper exploration.	"It made me feel interested in this subject"	24	17
	8	Recognising basic intercultural aspects without personal engagement.	"Different countries have different customs and traditions"	11	19
Reflection	9	Connecting personal experiences with intercultural concepts.	"I thought about own experiences talking to international students, which helped me understand their communication styles better"	19	8
	10	Considering the impact of learning on personal beliefs and behaviours.	"I realised that my beliefs didn't help me to talk to others"	20	7
	11	Demonstrating self-awareness and thought processes	"I started thinking that maybe I should change my ideas about culture"	19	8
	12	Indicating ongoing learning.	"I need to seek out opportunities to learn about myself and other people"	28	7
Critical Reflection	13	Deep analysis and reassessment of personal beliefs and assumptions.	"I realised that my understanding of cultures was based on stereotypes. It has helped me challenge and change my understanding"	14	4
	14	Indications of personal change and adaptation.	"I have incorporated many ideas into my own thinking"	14	4
	15	Integrating multiple perspectives and demonstrating new intercultural learning.	"I've changed how I think about others by appreciating different values. I believe it's important to see people as individuals"	14	3

Table 2
Categorisation of Reflective Content Across Case A and B

For the “habitual action/non-reflection” category, student language primarily focused on recalling information, describing activities, and completing tasks. Reflections often emphasised what students had done, with little indication of what they thought or felt. Case B (non-intervention group) exhibited higher counts of superficial reflections across subcategories compared to Case A (intervention group). For example, in subcategory 1, Case B recorded 29 instances, while Case A had 15. In subcategory 4, Case B had 36 instances compared to 12 in Case A. Overall, Case B produced 154 instances at this level, more than double Case A’s 73. These patterns suggest that students without the innovation were more likely to produce surface-level reflections. In contrast, Case A showed more instances of deeper reflection, with 128 items coded under the “reflection” and “critical reflection” categories combined, compared to 41 in Case B. Within the “understanding” category, reflections demonstrated conceptual grasp of intercultural issues, though without personal connection or deeper insight. Case B had more instances here (55 vs. 46), suggesting that more Case A students provided reflections beyond this stage. Case A recorded 86 instances in the “reflection” category (subcategories 9 to 12), while Case B had 30. This suggested students in Case A were more likely to engage with their experiences and demonstrate reflective thinking. For “critical reflection,” Case A again had more than Case B, 42 instances compared to 11, indicating more frequent reassessment of beliefs and assumptions. Overall, the data suggested that the letter-writing activity supported deeper levels of reflection, helping students move beyond descriptive responses to more critical analysis of their learning. However, the presence of habitual-level responses in Case A indicates that, while the innovation was broadly effective, some students may require further support to fully engage in deeper reflection.

Identifying Students’ Own Intercultural Learning: Examples from Case A

For deeper insight into Case A, this section presents four students as embedded units of analysis (i.e., individual participants within Case A, examined in depth to explore variation and enhance understanding of case-level patterns). These students were purposefully selected to illustrate variation in reflective engagement across the four categories of Kember et al.’s (2008) framework. Each example demonstrates how students responded differently to the structured letter-writing innovation and how their reflective texts revealed distinct patterns of reflection on their own intercultural learning.

Student One: Habitual Action/non-reflection

Initial Letter: I know there will be activities about different cultures, and I think they will be interesting. I’ll try my best to finish the tasks and learn as much as I can ... I don’t know much about culture

yet, but it will be useful for understanding different countries ... I also want to practice writing more in English because I think it will help me improve my skills.

Later Reflection: I completed all the class units and did the homework. I joined in discussions and shared my thoughts... It was good chance for me to practice writing and speaking in English, and I learned new information about other countries...

Student One's reflections exemplified characteristics of "habitual action/non-reflection" in the focus on task completion and superficial engagement with learning content. In the initial letter, the student implied a transactional approach to the course, focusing on fulfilling assignment criteria and improving skills. In their later reflection, the student reiterated their task-focused perspective, noting that they "completed all the class units and did the homework" and participated in discussions. While they acknowledged learning new cultural information, this understanding remained descriptive and general, without evidence of connecting these insights to their own experiences or broader concepts. The reflection remained at the surface level. It suggested that more structured support beyond the innovation in its current form may be necessary to guide some students toward deeper levels of reflection on their intercultural learning.

Student Two: Understanding

Initial Letter: Culture is something that has been passed down in each country, and I think it is a symbol of each country. For example, Japanese culture values politeness, and American culture values freedom... I want to learn more about traditions and customs... I hope this class teaches me about what makes people from different countries different... I think it will help me communicate with people from other countries.

Later Reflection: In my letter, I wrote about traditions and customs... I've learned that culture is also about values and beliefs, and these can be different even in the same country... I think it's important to think about this when speaking with foreigners... I still have more to learn

Student Two's reflections were interpreted as "understanding," characterised by a focus on conceptual understanding but without personal connection to the learning content. In their initial letter, the student described culture as something primarily defined by traditions and customs, associating it with national symbols and stereotypes. Their perspective appeared general in its emphasis of external and observable traits of culture. In the later reflection, the student demonstrated an expanded understanding of culture as they acknowledged diversity within cultures, reflecting a more complex view than their initial essentialist stance. While they recognised the importance of cultural awareness for future communication, their

response did not include any evidence of connecting this knowledge to their own lived experiences or a reassessment of their own assumptions.

Student Three: Reflection

Initial Letter: I want to learn about new cultures because it's interesting. I've always been curious about how people live in other countries... I am interested in learning about family differences... it's important to learn about cultural differences... I hope this class will give me confidence to speak with people from other cultures, and I think this will help me in my future.

Later Reflection: After taking this class, I feel that my way of thinking about myself has changed. Before, I was curious about other countries and thought it would be fun to learn about them. Now, I've started to reflect more on my own background and how I act and communicate... I realised that my preference for being direct in conversations might not always work well... I want to keep learning about myself and see how I can communicate with others

Student Three's reflections were interpreted in the "reflection" category. In the initial letter, the student expressed curiosity about other cultures, focusing on external aspects such as family traditions. In the later reflection, the student apparently shifted from an external curiosity about others to a reflective consideration of their own cultural background and its influence on their communication style. They noted how their preference for directness in conversations may have been shaped by their upbringing and recognised that this might not align with all contexts. In addition to observations on their self-awareness, the student considered how their own identity might impact their interactions with others. By revisiting their initial thoughts, the student was able to articulate changes in their understanding and begin to integrate these insights into their self-awareness.

Student Four: Critical Reflection

Initial Letter: Culture is about where you come from, like your nationality or ethnic background. For example, Japanese people are polite, and Americans are independent... I hope this course will teach me how to interact with people from other countries... I don't think I have many opportunities to talk to people from different cultures now, but I'd like to in the future.

Later Reflection: I realised that my own understanding of culture was based on... I used to think that politeness was just in Japanese culture, but now I understand that people within the same culture can show politeness in different ways... It made me think about how my assumptions affect how I communicate with others. I've started to question these stereotypes... I try to see people as individuals... This has been a big change for me, and I think it will help me interact with other people in the future.

Student Four's reflections aligned with the "critical reflection" category in its demonstration of transformative insights through critical reassessment of their assumptions and the incorporation of new perspectives. In the initial letter, the student described (what was interpreted as) an essentialist understanding of culture, equating it with national traits and traditions. In their later reflection, the student exhibited a shift in understanding, acknowledging that their earlier views were based on stereotypes. The student recognised that their assumption of universal politeness within Japanese culture was simplistic and noted that people express their values in diverse ways. It demonstrated the student's ability to critically analyse and challenge their previous assumptions. Furthermore, the student explicitly connected this new understanding to their communication practices, stating an intention to move beyond seeing individuals as representatives of their culture and instead viewing them as unique individuals. This shift illustrated critical reflection, as the student not only reassessed their cultural assumptions but also apparently internalised a new perspective.

Summary and Discussion

This study found that a structured letter-writing activity encouraged deeper engagement with intercultural learning and reduced superficial reflections among most students. At the text level, "habitual action/non-reflection" responses appeared more frequently in Case B than in Case A, suggesting that in the absence of guided prompts, students may default to describing what they did rather than examining what they learnt. These findings reflect broader concerns that reflection, when left unsupported, can become a procedural task shaped by time pressures or unclear expectations (Mitchell, 2008). Case A also had fewer instances of reflections coded as "understanding," indicating that the innovation helped shift some students beyond basic conceptual understandings toward more personal engagement. This shift was evident in the 14 students who demonstrated "reflection," marked by connections between course content and personal experience. Such engagement aligns with perspectives that meaningful reflection involves not only intellectual effort but also emotional investment, requiring time and structure to support students in recognising and articulating their own learning (Boud et al., 1985). At the "critical reflection" level, 16 students provided evidence of engaging in deep analysis and reassessment of their beliefs. For example,

among students in Case A, there were reflections indicating independent recognition of cultural complexity and commitment to adapting their communication practices. The comparatively lower frequency of such reflections in Case B highlighted the importance of structured reflective opportunities and aligned with perspectives that such innovations can be effective (Prinsloo et al., 2011; Radović et al., 2022). These findings suggest that structured, personalised reflection can support multicultural goals by helping students become more aware of their assumptions and how these might have changed. However, the presence of habitual reflections in Case A also highlighted the limitations of the innovation in fully engaging all students. Indeed, there are challenges in some reflective practices which can be regarded as formulaic or overly prescriptive (e.g., Tight, 2023).

The content analysis of individual items revealed more in-depth differences. Case A demonstrated a higher frequency of deeper reflections in the “reflection” and “critical reflection” categories. This suggested that the structured letter-writing innovation helped more students to engage more meaningfully in reflective processes. Furthermore, Case A exhibited fewer instances of superficial reflections in the “habitual and non-reflection” category compared to Case B. This disparity indicated value in the structured innovation in terms of reducing surface-level responses, supported by Prinsloo et al. (2011), who emphasised the importance of scaffolding to direct students toward deeper reflection. However, the variability in reflective depth across Case A suggests that the innovation did not fully engage all students. This may reflect students prioritising task completion under real or perceived course expectations. Tight (2023) and Ixer (2016) noted that reflection can become formulaic or superficial when shaped by perceived instructor expectations or rigid rubrics.

The four students’ reflective progressions from Case A offered insight into how the structured letter-writing innovation supported varied levels of reflective engagement, as conceptualised in Kember et al.’s (2008) framework. Student One’s focus was on task completion and descriptive recounting of classroom activities. It linked to concerns in Mitchell (2008) and Tight (2023) that reflection, when insufficiently supported, can default to checklist-style summaries lacking meaningful engagement with ideas. In contrast, Student Two demonstrated an understanding of intercultural ideas but without connecting them to personal experience, illustrating the difficulty of integrating cognitive and affective elements in reflective practice (Boud et al., 1985). Student Three provided an indication of drawing on personal experiences and insights, showing self-awareness and engagement with course content. Finally, Student Four’s writing offered a reassessment of assumptions and a shift in perspective. The student not only questioned earlier essentialist views of culture but also articulated new ways of thinking about individuals and cultural difference, connecting with the goals of transformative learning (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1997).

The analysis across levels and cases suggests there is value in this form of structured, personalised reflection in helping students recognise and articulate their intercultural learning. While not all students reached deeper levels of

reflection, the letter-writing innovation appeared to create conditions in which more students moved beyond procedural responses toward greater introspection and critical engagement. Importantly, the opportunity to revisit earlier writing encouraged students to track changes in their thinking over time, an element that may be especially valuable in intercultural learning, where learning can be complex and gradual, and occur in ways which differ from how learning is standardised on fixed, linear models. However, the recurrence of superficial responses suggests that structured interventions alone may not ensure deep reflection. The ongoing challenge lies in designing tasks that are both personally meaningful and sufficiently scaffolded to encourage authentic engagement.

Implications

The innovation's guiding questions directed students' attention to specific areas of self-reflection, with the aim to help reduce superficial responses and encourage intentional introspection (e.g., Rodgers, 2002). Recognising that intercultural learning is individual (e.g., Byram, 1997), this research has shown how a structured but flexible reflection task supports students as they identify and articulate their own learning. The letter-writing activity supported reflection that was both personally relevant and academically purposeful, offering an alternative to more procedural approaches. In the Japanese university context, where reflective writing may often be treated as a formality tied to assessment or to critique one's own learning, there is a risk that reflection becomes a procedural task rather than a space for meaning-making. As students engage with intercultural learning experiences, reflection is important for examining assumptions and making sense of learning experiences on a personal level. This study offers one practical approach that supports this kind of reflection in contexts where reflective skills may not always be explicitly taught or embedded. Related approaches which incorporate before-and-after reflections include video diaries, where students record their initial expectations and later revisit these in subsequent recordings. A reflective journaling approach may also be effective with specific prompts given at key points during a course to guide students through stages of reflection. Such approaches share an emphasis on reflection as an evolving process rather than a final product, with potential to support deeper learning over time. Intercultural learning may later extend beyond awareness and introspection towards praxis, or the integration of reflection and action. In this sense, it involves applying insights to real-life situations, such as reconsidering communication choices, adjusting behaviours, or engaging ethically with cultural differences. The reflective task in this study aimed to support internal processes of meaning-making. It did not track behavioural outcomes; however, increased awareness of one's assumptions and values may offer a foundation for future intercultural activity.

While Kember et al.'s (2008) framework provides a useful structure for categorising reflective depth, standardised frameworks risk oversimplifying nuanced responses. Reflection is inherently personal and often involves complex

experiences and deeply held beliefs; researchers should take care that coding processes do not reduce reflective writing to fixed levels or simple counts in broad categories. In this study, combining item-level content analysis with whole-text coding allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation, and contextual information was used to support categorisation decisions. The approach adopted may be useful for other researchers who wish to apply the framework to research in their own contexts, allowing for the addition of more specific items within each category that reflect data patterns and similarities emerging from contextualised projects.

Limitations

The study is limited by its reliance on students' written reflections, which are likely to vary widely in terms of willingness and ability to articulate personal thoughts. Some students may have found it difficult to express deeper reflective insights due to limited confidence or preference for other forms of expression. Similarly, just because students expressed themselves in a manner interpreted by the authors as "reflective" or "critically reflective" does not guarantee that the cognitive and emotional processes associated with genuine reflection actually occurred. Likewise, it is also possible that some students' writing exhibited elements of only "habitual action/non-reflection" behaviours; yet, the students had actually failed to express deeper reflections which had occurred. The study was conducted in a Japanese university setting with specific cohorts of students enrolled in an elective intercultural learning programme. Factors, such as students' predispositions toward self-expression and reflection, may have influenced the findings. Although the study focused on individual engagement rather than cultural comparisons, the fact that the vast majority of participants were Japanese students is relevant. Cultural and educational norms around reflection, as well as students' past experiences with reflective writing, may have shaped how they interpreted and responded to the tasks, even though their personal experiences with these norms were not directly explored in this study. For example, reflection in Japanese contexts may be associated with self-critique (e.g., Yabukoshi, 2020), which may influence how students approach such tasks. These local educational and cultural norms should be considered when interpreting findings in other settings, where localised understandings of reflection are also relevant. While Kember et al.'s (2008) framework provided a structured way to analyse reflections, its categorisation into discrete levels may not fully capture the individual and multifaceted nature of student reflections. There is a risk that this structured approach oversimplified complex thought processes or excluded emergent themes that did not align neatly with the framework, although efforts were made to address this by organising data-driven subcategories through content analysis. Finally, the dual role of the researchers as both instructors and analysts introduced a potential for bias, as interpretations of student reflections may have been influenced by prior knowledge of the students or the course context.

Conclusion

This study, comparing two cases, showed that a reflective activity involving letters written to oneself supported more students in producing deeper reflections and identifying their own intercultural learning. By asking students to respond directly to their own earlier writing, the task created a personalised point of comparison that helped to make changes in students' own thinking and behaviour more visible and meaningful. Students in Case A demonstrated higher levels of reflection and critical reflection than those in Case B, suggesting that structured but personally relevant activities can help move reflection beyond routine or surface-level responses. At the same time, the findings have addressed a wider issue in how reflection, when treated as a standardised or assessed requirement, can lose personal value and instead take on a procedural or performative character. The letter-writing activity offered an alternative by encouraging student ownership, reducing pressure to meet predefined expectations, and allowing space for diverse interpretations of intercultural learning. In this way, it contributes to more student-centred and inclusive approaches to reflection. Educators and researchers are encouraged to develop and share their reflective innovations to support efforts to ensure reflection is inclusive and personally meaningful, as well as adaptable across disciplines and educational contexts.

Notes

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including permission to publish anonymised data. Participants received written information via Moodle and had the option to opt in or opt out without penalty. No identifying information is included in this study. Ethical approval was granted by the authors' university ethical review board. The authors report no conflict of interest.

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