


Digital Intercultural Education: A Comparative Study of Self-Access Learning Experiences

Gareth Humphreys, PhD

Sojo University, Kumamoto, Japan

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1666-5993>

Contact: ghumphreys@m.sojo-u.ac.jp

Abstract

Objectives: Two sets of intercultural learning resources incorporating Global Englishes learning content were developed for self-access use in the higher education context. The resources were investigated in terms of student learning experiences across two contexts in Japan: an English language major program and a nonlanguage major program. The aim was to develop an understanding of student learning experiences to inform practical implications for self-access learning in these areas.

Method: The educational resources were investigated in a qualitative content analysis of reflective writing and supporting survey data from 30 students across the two university programs to understand how (and if) they supported student learning as well as how the resources and form of learning were perceived by the students.

Results: Resources in both universities led to similar learning outcomes, showing that self-access resources can support intercultural and Global Englishes learning. A longer time requirement was necessitated by one set of resources, which was criticised by students. Students also indicated a preference for collaborative learning aspects.

Conclusions: This pedagogically focused article contributes to the discussion around digital resources for intercultural and Global Englishes learning. Short-form resources integrating these areas may be more effective for self-access learning than resources requiring multiweek commitments in both language and nonlanguage major programs. Aspects of collaborative learning in self-access engagement appealed to students.

Implication for Theory and/or Practice: Carefully designed short resources based on the conceptual framework and on recommendations outlined in this article may lead to effective self-access student learning, particularly in resources involving collaborative work.

Keywords: *digital educational resources, intercultural learning, self-access, Global Englishes*

Date Submitted: September 6, 2023 | **Date Accepted:** March 28, 2023 | **Date Published:** April 17, 2023

Recommended Citation

Humphreys, G. (2023). Digital intercultural education: A comparative study of self-access learning experiences. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 13(1), 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v13i1.1365>

Introduction

Within English language teaching (ELT), there are calls to integrate intercultural learning (e.g., Byram, 2021) and represent diversity in global English use (e.g., Rose & Galloway, 2019). At the university level, these calls can be situated within language and intercultural learning practices linked to higher education (HE) internationalization, which reflects “the incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes” (Leask, 2015, p. 9). Related institutional policies tend to focus on developing graduate skills to connect with others in an interconnected world (Leask, 2015). Though it is common to associate this learning (particularly intercultural learning) with mobility only, there are assertions that it is important for home-based students to have access to such learning opportunities (De Wit, 2020). Digital education, also referred to as e-learning or online pedagogy, involves the pedagogical use of technology (e.g., texts, sounds, videos, images, interactive activities) for learning (Väättäjä & Ruokamo, 2021). Its integration within HE curricula is based on the perspective that digital learning can enhance learning experiences, and there have been attempts to engage digital learning tools with student-centred learning (e.g., Awidi & Paynter, 2022; Trinidad & Ngo, 2019). Finding space for such learning can be problematic, however, based on other curricular requirements. According to Herrera Díaz (2012), self-access refers to the “organization of learning materials and equipment to make them available and accessible to students without necessarily having a teacher there” (p. 54). Self-access resources aim to provide learner-centred and flexible learner opportunities that are interactive and provide opportunities to practice, apply, and receive feedback on their learning (e.g., Kongchan & Darasawang, 2015). Such learning has been promoted in HE in some international contexts for many years, while considered a recent innovation in other contexts, including Japan, where this study was situated (Mynard, 2019). In some contexts, however, student interaction with such educational resources may be limited and may not lead toward intended learning outcomes (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015).

In this article, intercultural learning is conceptualised through intercultural awareness (ICA), defined by Baker (2015) as “a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context-specific manner in communication” (p. 163). In terms of content, teachers may perceive intercultural learning as valuable, but there are risks that some teachers adopt outmoded perspectives towards intercultural learning linked to essentialism, the presumption “that there is a universal essence, homogeneity, and unity in a particular culture” (Holliday et al., 2021, p. 1). Such perspectives in educational design may lead to stereotyping rather than to understanding individuals as complex and multifaceted members of multiple cultures and communities, not only national cultures (Baker, 2015). There can also be outmoded perspectives in education towards English language use as based exclusively on the standard norms of native English users rather than on individual language practices among all users. A Global Englishes orientation, adopted in this research, is based on the expansive development and use of English in diverse global communication contexts. Global Englishes has been defined as “an inclusive paradigm looking at the linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural diversity and fluidity of English use and English users in a globalized world” (Rose & Galloway, 2019, p. 4). Associated learning content may help students develop important awareness of diversity in English language use and among users and that they themselves are legitimate users of English.

This research was motivated by a desire to develop self-access digital resources for intercultural learning that integrated Global Englishes content and compare learning and student experiences across English major and nonmajor programs. The study compares learning experiences from self-access digital intercultural resources on two types of university programs: compulsory non-English language major programs and English major programs. In non-English language major programs, students’ core studies are not based on language study, but English language courses are often compulsory additional components to their courses, and there may be variations in terms of motivation. On the other hand, English major programs are designed for students who

have chosen to learn English as a core aspect of their degree programs, with career opportunities in areas such as translation, interpretation, language education, and international business. These programs often feature smaller class sizes, providing more opportunities for individualized attention and student interaction. Throughout HE, intercultural learning is an important goal often highlighted in both such settings in statements around internationalization on university websites.

The goal of this research was to investigate how self-access digital resources may lead to learning through self-access and student experiences of such learning, with results compared across language major and nonlanguage major university programs. This article adds to the discourse on how intercultural and Global Englishes learning may be integrated in digital resources, and it offers practical recommendations for self-access resource design.

Literature Review

Digital Educational Resources and Self-Access

In many universities, digital educational experiences are used to complement or consolidate class-based learning into blended approaches that integrate online learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Educational experiences may also be provided in self-contained and autonomous asynchronous options (e.g., Hrastinski, 2008). Such experiences can relate to self-access learning, commonly promoted within universities based on perspectives that learning processes are enhanced following increased student responsibility over learning (McMurry et al., 2010). In self-access learning, students may independently select from available resources typically located in a designated self-access centre that can be a physical or virtual space (e.g., Benson, 2017). Digital self-access essentially involves providing learning materials online, including opportunities for online support (Rubesch & Barrs, 2014). In contexts where the use of personal electronic devices is widespread, this form of learning may be accessed in students' own time using their own devices. Students may then work with resources voluntarily, though guidance can be important.

Digital educational resources for intercultural and Global Englishes learning (see "Conceptual Framework" in the next section) may be based on intercultural exchanges by engaging students in online interaction and collaboration with students in other settings via blogging, email exchanges, or other online communication methods. Such methods have been reported as effective for learning based on student perceptions of value in such exchanges (Schenker, 2012), though not in relation to ICA and Global Englishes. In particular, blogs can foster communities with individuals in other international contexts (Lee & Markey, 2014). While intercultural learning following the use of such resources may be superficial at times (Keränen & Bayyurt, 2006), resources can provide self-reflective opportunities for students on their own perspectives and how these change (or do not change). Establishing intercultural exchanges for self-access learning, however, can be challenging in terms of setting up and managing such initiatives, though blogs and forums may be accessible options in self-access learning.

For self-access, it may be practical to provide online learning through different types of independent engagement. These may include massive open online courses (MOOCs), which offer Internet-distributed content in flexible open-access and self-access learning (e.g., Perna et al., 2014). Several MOOCs for intercultural learning or linked to English language awareness can be found in online repositories, including <https://www.classcentral.com> and <https://www.futurelearn.com/>, though there appear to be few that integrate intercultural learning and Global Englishes. A common problem with MOOCs is low completion rates despite availability to large numbers of students. There are further challenges in how these kinds of self-access resources lead to effective learning among students who are not used to self-access learning, and there may be preferences among some for teacher-centred approaches. Despite these concerns, self-access learning is promoted in many HE settings (Mynard, 2019), so it is important to develop resources to identify ways in

which such learning can be supported. This article offers one such attempt, in terms of intercultural and Global Englishes integrated learning.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this research is based on an integration of ICA (Baker, 2015) and Global Englishes (Rose & Galloway, 2019). The framework emphasises understandings of individuals as members of multiple social and cultural groupings, as well as emphasising diversity in English language use and among users. The framework also incorporates the description by Holliday et al. (2021) of nonessentialism, which emphasises culture as complex and understandings of a person's cultural identity beyond national descriptions. The essentialist and nonessentialist distinction may be simplistic with nonessentialism viewed uncomplicatedly as the learning goal, overlooking that perspectives often range between the two, depending on context (Holliday et al., 2021). Nonetheless, providing opportunities to reflect on these areas may constitute useful learning. In looking at intercultural learning following the use of digital educational resources, this article refers to the ICA model, organised within 12 stages in three levels building from basic cultural understandings to more complex understanding of culture beyond national cultural characterisations. A limited number of ICA studies in educational settings have been conducted indicating its use in research on intercultural learning (e.g., Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Yu & van Maele, 2018). Level 2, therefore, in its nonessentialist focus, was considered useful to provide educational aims for the design of resources examined in this research. Level 2 refers to awareness of

the relative nature of cultural norms; cultural understanding as provisional and open to revision; multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping; individuals as members of many social groupings including cultural ones; common ground between specific cultures as well as an awareness of possibilities for mismatch and miscommunication between specific cultures. (Baker, 2015, p. 164)

The integration of Global Englishes content helps to challenge conventional educational approaches to English use as fixed and determined by the (imagined) norms of native English-speaking countries. Global Englishes encompasses both variability in individual language practices and location-based diversity in the study of world Englishes (e.g., Kachru et al., 2006). It offers a pluralistic perspective on the use of English in various contexts. A central area of Global Englishes is English as a lingua franca (ELF), “multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen” (Jenkins, 2015, p. 73). ELF use is characterised by variability, beyond standardisation and is dependent on the needs of particular moments of communication. Given the majority of intercultural communication in English takes place through ELF (Baker, 2015), raising awareness of ELF's role in effective communication among students may lead to a heightened sense of language awareness and increased confidence in using English. Specific content may be designed to differentiate language use from the standard norms typically taught in ELT. In practice, this often involves exposure and reflection. Exposure may occur through readings, discussions, and assignments on English language use in global contexts, or students may explore representations of different speakers in language textbooks or different conceptualisations of English ownership. It may also be provided via videos and audio recordings to expose students to different accents and language structures. A central aim is to promote awareness of linguistic diversity (e.g., Rose & Galloway, 2019). This kind of content may be incorporated within English language classes or, in some settings, presented on Global Englishes-focused courses, though its impact broadly in English language education remains somewhat limited.

Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

An integration of intercultural and Global Englishes learning in self-access digital resources is underrepresented in the literature, though this is an important area for learning reflected in some educational developments (Baker, 2012; Humphreys, 2021). The purpose of this research was to explore how new

resources designed around the conceptual framework were effective (in terms of learning and learning experiences) in two university programs in Japan (an English language major and a nonlanguage major setting). It was guided by the following question: What differences in learning and learning experiences could be observed following self-access use of digital learning resources designed around intercultural awareness and Global Englishes among students in two university contexts in Japan?

This comparison of the two programs (English as compulsory study vs. English as elected study) is important in relation to calls for intercultural and Global Englishes content to be provided for university students across HE on both types of programs. Carefully designed digital learning may offer possibilities to support intercultural learning and learning around Global Englishes via self-access, which may also help navigate limited availability of space within curricula since self-access offers learning opportunities for students in a way that does not require changes to established curricula already in use. Understanding the extent that learning was enabled via self-access in the two programs was the central aim of this research.

Methods

Research Settings and Participants

Two university programs in Japan, University A (nonlanguage major) and University B (English major), were involved in this research. In University A (UnivA), the author (who was the teacher in the setting and resource designer) managed the resources (outlined in next section). In University B (UnivB), the resources were managed by a teacher in that setting and connected to the researcher through membership of a local teaching association. Table 1 displays a comparison of these two universities.

Table 1. Description of the Two University Settings

	University A Compulsory English program for nonlanguage majors	University B English language program for English-focused degrees
Location	Southwest Japan	Central Japan
Funding	Private	Private
Disciplinary focus	Architecture, Computer Science, Engineering, Pharmacy	Area Studies, English Language, Languages, International Studies
Language major	No	Yes
Approx. number of students	3,700	3,200
Nationality of students	98% Japanese; 2% international	93% Japanese; 7% international
Average age on entry	19	19
English program	First-year and second-year students took two 90-minute mandatory English communication classes. Fixed curriculum with little space for formal integration of Global Englishes learning.	All students took four weekly 90-minute English classes. Curriculum fixed and with no integration of Global Englishes learning.
Culture education	Limited cultural topics within English language curricula. Some focus on short study abroad participation. A student global communication committee for those interested in different cultures.	Students take classes specifically focused on culture, literature, and civilisation. Extensive opportunities to study abroad. Extensive resources dedicated to language and culture in clubs and cultural events.
Self-access learning facilities	Private study spaces, books, listening stations. Informal communication opportunities with teachers (during which cultural topics were often discussed). Self-access use tended to appeal to few students (given focus on core degree studies).	Established self-access centre where exam-based self-study was emphasised. Opportunities to engage in communication with teachers available. Students described by the local teacher as active in their use of the centre.
Language teachers	2 Japanese; 17 non-Japanese	3 Japanese; 12 non-Japanese

Digital resource design was based on the conceptual framework involving the development of a view of culture as fluid and dynamic. Resource design included the recognition that individuals have multiple cultural identities, and resources focused on the complexity of cultural identities and experiences, stereotypes, and generalisations. Moreover, there was recognition that culture is not monolithic or limited to traditional or folkloric aspects. Global Englishes content was also integrated within the content.

In both universities, HE internationalisation policies could be found on the university websites around developing “global graduates” who are able to communicate, work, and function effectively in multicultural environments. It was important, therefore, for the universities to develop curricula to support these policies in educational practice. Moreover, a focus on self-access in Japanese contexts is relevant given increased self-access learning promotion in Japan and because Japanese university students tend to spend less time on out-of-class learning activities (particularly in comparison with U.S. students; Yamada, 2014). In University A, 15 students volunteered to work with the self-access content. There was variation in age (19–24 years), gender (female = 9; male = 6), and time spent abroad (never = 11; less than 4 weeks = 4; 3–6 months = 0). In University B, 28 students worked with the resources in long form. Among those 28, 15 were randomly selected to participate, with variation in age (20–22 years), gender (female = 8; male = 7), and time spent abroad (never = 8; less than 4 weeks = 5; 3–6 months = 2). In University A, students reported using English primarily with other students in classes and with language teachers. Students in University B reported wider experiences using English beyond the classroom in nonclass settings. All students had access to their own digital devices. Involvement in the research was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from participants via an online consent form. Before conducting the research, ethical approval was obtained from both universities.

Given differences in the university contexts, using a long form (University B) and a short form (University A), two sets of resources were developed. Both were developed around the same 10 topic areas: (1) defining culture, (2) individuals and cultures, (3) exploring own cultures, (4) English in Japan, (5) global English, (6) English diversity, (7) working with others, (8) intercultural communication, (9) intercultural awareness, and (10) intercultural citizenship. Long-form resources were designed to be engaged with as a multiweek set of resources. These resources provided a more in-depth learning experience, allowing participants to engage with the topics in greater detail. Each topic could have taken up to 2 hours to work through and included online work, interactive activities, reading challenges, and task-based activities in a more comprehensive, sustained, and focused engagement requirement. The short-form resources were designed to take approximately 30 minutes and contained fewer (one or two) tasks. These resources were developed as more easily accessible and easier to complete in a nonlanguage-major context. It was assumed that they would provide a more high-level presentation of the topic areas yet still be valuable for building intercultural awareness. However, it was accepted that the lack of depth in the material may limit learning. On both versions, following engagement with content on each of the 10 topics, students completed short reflections in which they considered the following questions:

1. What were your perspectives towards this area before you completed these tasks?
2. How have your perspectives changed (or not changed) following these tasks?

These reflections constituted the core part of the data set.

Resources could be accessed in one of two ways: via a custom app available for download to students’ devices and via a web browser. In a final task (on both versions), students reflected on what the content meant to them individually in English or Japanese. The resources, therefore, emphasised written reflections, acknowledging that writing can be highly effective for communication of expression (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). In all resource design, content was translated into Japanese and presented alongside English content. The translation was initially conducted by the researcher before checks and changes were made by a

professional Japanese translator. Content was then reviewed by a local teacher, conceptually aware in intercultural education. Posters were displayed around campuses and shown within English classes to inform students of the new self-access learning option.

Instrumentation

The researcher adopted a qualitative focus on student reflections completed following the use of each of the 10 resources during the 2021–2022 academic year. These data were supported by supplementary survey data obtained via Microsoft Forms, involving a 10-item survey (see Table 2) on perspectives towards culture and English language using a five-point scale of agreement (1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = unsure; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree). Students completed surveys before starting to work with the resources and then again after completing them. Students answered four additional open-ended questions at the end of the study to help the researcher understand the user experience and perceptions of the quality of learning content. These questions are as follows.

1. What did you enjoy about the self-access learning resources?
2. What did you not enjoy about the learning resources?
3. How do you think the learning resources can be improved?
4. Do you think this kind of learning is useful? Why/why not?

The teacher/researcher maintained a diary containing personal reflections and observations on resource design and how students were working with (or not working with) the resources.

Analysis

The key part of the data set were reflections done after completing each of the 10 tasks; 110 reflections were examined from the long-form version and 98 reflections from the short-form version (not all students completed all reflections). Supporting closed-item survey data were analysed by means (average score among all participants) and standard deviations (variability of scores around the mean) for each item at the two points, looking for any changes. These data were also used in a basic comparison between the survey responses from University A and University B to determine whether they were significantly different from each other. Open-ended responses were categorized by emergent topic following manual coding. A content analysis of the reflections was conducted to explore tangible and concrete surface content from the reflections (Miles et al., 2014). Since students could reflect in English or Japanese, translation work was necessitated. Initially, translations were conducted via DeepL online translator (<https://www.deepl.com/en/translator>) followed by checks made by the researcher and a Japanese co-worker to see how these translations matched content in the original discourses. Translations are identified where they appear in the findings. In the focus on learning, the analysis relied on predetermined coding linked to the conceptual orientation, though these codes were slightly refined during the analysis to reflect the data. On student learning experiences and perceptions towards the quality of learning content, data-driven codes developed. NVivo 12 was used for analyses. All reflections were first read to gain an understanding of the data and to identify patterns, similarities, and contradictions (Miles et al., 2014). Data were then coded into categories with individual items linked and integrated. Notes were made during the coding process to record researcher interpretations. The presurvey and postsurvey items were analysed comparatively to identify changes in perspectives over time.

Findings

Student Learning

In Table 2, data from the 10-item survey are displayed next to the 10 statements (see Instrumentation).

Table 2. *Survey Responses*

		University A		University B		
		Presurvey or postsurvey	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Culture is complex	Pre	4.06	0.85	4.13	0.95
		Post	4.46	0.62	4.46	0.61
2	Cultures are diverse	Pre	4.26	0.85	4.26	0.85
		Post	4.46	0.62	4.46	0.61
3	Cultures are homogenous	Pre	3.73	1.18	3.93	1.06
		Post	3.13	0.88	2.81	1.50
4	I understand stereotypes and their risks	Pre	3.73	1.18	3.66	1.24
		Post	4.27	0.92	4.26	0.92
5	Individuals are defined by the national cultures	Pre	3.46	1.45	3.53	1.49
		Post	3.00	1.41	2.80	1.46
6	There are many social groupings within national cultures	Pre	4.00	1.03	4.26	0.92
		Post	4.13	1.08	4.40	0.87
7	I have things in common with individuals who speak different first languages	Pre	3.86	1.08	4.00	0.89
		Post	4.41	0.98	4.26	0.57
8	I am aware English is a global language	Pre	4.40	0.61	4.26	0.57
		Post	4.53	0.61	4.46	0.49
9	Speaking English correctly is very important in English communication	Pre	3.86	1.02	4.13	0.88
		Post	2.00	0.89	2.40	1.20
10	My aim is to speak English like a native speaker	Pre	3.53	1.40	3.60	1.08
		Post	2.13	1.14	2.20	1.22

From Table 2 data, it can be seen that endorsement of culture as complex (question 1) was evident in the presurveys and postsurveys in both universities, and there were similar responses among students in both programs around recognition of diversity in cultures (question 2). On homogeneity in cultures (question 3), some changes occurred between the surveys, with more disagreement in the later survey in both contexts. Similarly, there was indication of change in awareness around stereotyping and associated risks (question 4), with slightly more agreement than uncertainty in the later survey. Additionally, the study revealed a new thinking around individuals and how they may be defined by their national cultures (question 5), with more

disagreement observed in the later survey among students in both programs. Awareness of different social groupings within national cultures (question 6) remained largely unchanged with a high level of agreement among students in both programs. There were slight increases in awareness of commonalities among students and others who speak different first languages (question 7). In terms of Global Englishes, students were similarly aware of English as a global language in the presurvey (question 8); however, changes were seen in perceptions of importance of using English “correctly” (i.e., following standard norms—question 9) and aims to speak English like a native English speaker (question 10).

A comparison of coding from reflections resulting from the two sets of resources is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. *Coding Categories and Their Frequency of Occurrence*

Coding label	University A	University B
1 Culture as complex	34	41
2 Stereotype awareness	37	48
3 Multiple voices or perspectives within any cultural grouping	42	51
4 Expressing common ground with other individuals	48	54
5 Differences among people are mainly based on national cultures	10	14
6 New Global Englishes awareness	23	34

The number of items coded at each label was broadly similar in both universities. While several comments referred to cultural differences at the national level, there were also expressions of awareness of complexity in culture, multidimensionality among individuals, and expressions of commonalities with others. There was also more awareness of Global Englishes expressed among students from University B, though those students had also spent more hours studying English and reported using English more often out of class.

Culture as Complex

In both versions, there were reflections of complexity of understandings of culture in language indicating a change in perspective following engagement with content. For example, “Now I understand attitudes, habits, and ideas we communicate are hard to compare” (UnivA); and “After this task I realized that each person has their own way of thinking about what is important in cultures” (UnivB).

Stereotype Awareness

Most students at both universities reported perspectives towards individuals as separable from national cultures, linking to ICA Level 2 (awareness of relative nature of cultural norms). There were also intentions stated to adapt thinking in future instances of intercultural communication: “I thought individual and culture is the same thing... Now I don’t want to people stereotype because people have their own identity” (UnivA); “I think I have been misled by biased information against each country. From now on, I will respect and relate to others as individuals” (UnivB; translation).

Multiple Voices or Perspectives Within Any National Grouping

This delinking of individuals from national cultures was also evident in awareness of influences on individual identities, linking to ICA Level 2 (awareness of multiple voices within any cultural grouping). There was also awareness of multiplicity of cultural forms to which individuals may refer: “It is important when you understand the character of the other person to recognise the individuality” (UnivA; translation); “I was thinking about Japan on a national scale. Now, I am able to recognize that it exists at various levels” (UnivB; translation). There were also interpretations of students adapting thinking about their positions within their own national culture in perspectives; that is, aspects of identities may change in different contexts. These connections concerned awareness of how individuals make use of a multiplicity of cultural forms: “I sometimes have different habits and thinking from other people here but I don’t always show it” (UnivA); “I

felt that the community to which I belong could be changed in any way depending on my own way of thinking and experience and who I'm talking to" (UnivB; translation).

Expressing Common Ground With Other Individuals

Following both sets of resources, there were expressions of connections with others and less focus on basic cultural differences, linked to ICA Level 2 (awareness of common ground between cultures): "Even if people has same nationality, we both have similar points and different points" (UnivA); "Even friends who have a lot in common have something different from me, so I felt it was important to find the same part as myself and to have familiarity with other people from other countries" (UnivB; translation).

Differences Among People Are Mainly Based on National Cultures

However, there were examples of culture handled as homogenous and linked as inseparable with individuals/national cultures: "Foreign countries culture is interesting. I want to study abroad next year because I want to speak to English people and learn foreign countries culture" (UnivA); "I am Japanese and I know many unique things of the Japanese culture. I want to convey Japanese culture to many foreign people" (UnivB). Therefore, these resources did not lead unproblematically to only nonessentialist perspectives. Students' perspectives ranged between the two.

New Global Englishes Awareness

In terms of Global Englishes, particularly in relation to ELF awareness, there were reports of new conceptualisations of "errors" in English language use: "English is lingua franca, and even if there are mistakes, I think just need to convey the meaning, so I became a little confident in my English" (UnivA); "now I feel that it was important to understand the content well without being bound by grammar when communicating using English" (UnivB; translation). There were also reports of new confidence using English, particularly around students' own pronunciation and a focus on communication over adherence to standard norms. This understanding was particularly related to ELF, acceptance of their own ways of using English, as well as those of others: "Now, I think communication is way more important than speak perfect English. Maybe, each person speak in different way, but it is totally OK" (UnivA); "I used to hate my accent because it was very different from English in the United States. However, I'm understand it is OK. The point is communicating. Now accent is like just character or their uniqueness" (UnivB). The extent that these new perspectives translated into changes in communication behaviour was not made clear by this research.

Perceptions Towards Learning

In the open-ended survey responses, students tended to focus on intercultural learning over specific reference to Global Englishes; however, the survey questions did not explicitly invite feedback on these as separate areas. Coding from these feedback questions is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Coding From Open-Ended Feedback Questions*

	Coding label	University A	University B
1	Self-access learning engagement	12	15
2	Perceptions of importance in form and content of learning	10	12
3	Criticism towards learning structure	4	7
4	Criticism based on other study commitments	3	5

In University B, perceptions of importance in self-access learning around the topic areas were slightly higher, though most students in University A also perceived the form and content of learning as important. However, students in both programs also criticised this form of learning based on other study commitments.

Self-Access Learning Engagement

There were positive comments around self-access learning in terms of working alone and thinking deeply:

“Participating in intercultural learning was a great learning experience, and I enjoyed thinking about these topics” (UnivA; translation); “The topic was interesting so it made me critically think. Compare with face-to-face learning, self-access intercultural learning is draw out our true opinion and much thinkable” (UnivB). Most students reported positively on how they engaged in this form of self-access learning based on use of their own devices: “It was good because I can work in my own time using my phone” (UnivA); “I enjoyed it because I could see my progress on the app” (UnivB; translation).

Perceptions of Importance in Form and Content of Learning

In other feedback, students reported perceptions that the form of learning aligned with their intercultural learning objectives, also coded around perceptions of learning as important: “We have English learning but intercultural learning is quite new. I thought it was necessary to learn a broad perspective” (UnivA; translation); “I think it is useful because we do not have opportunity to learn intercultural learning” (UnivB; translation).

Criticism Towards Learning Structure

There were largely positive comments towards collaborative aspects of learning within the resources (e.g., online forums and offline interview tasks), which were perceived as useful in the exchange of ideas: “It may be good to set up more place for exchanging opinions with other students” (UnivA; translation); “I was able to understand the differences and look at the ideas of other participants. I found it interesting” (UnivB).

However, there was also criticism towards the self-access digital learning in both universities: “I was a little annoyed that I could not proceed to the next task without the permission of the teacher and could not do the task at my own pace” (UnivA; translation); “I don’t think it’s fun to do all self-access learning, especially about international culture. I think that everyone can enjoy participating in face-to-face classes” (UnivB). In criticism of the longer form, a need was highlighted for simplification of the instructions.

Criticism Based on Other Study Commitments

Some students reported in the final feedback that they had not been able to engage to the point of finishing all work, and thus improve learning outcomes, based on other study pressures on the longer versions: “It can be more simple, especially explanation part. It took too long, and I don’t have much time for studying it” (UnivB); “Questions were sometimes similar so it feels like repeating same things. I was quite busy and so I didn’t finish everything” (UnivB; translation).

Responses to Open-Ended Survey Questions

According to open-ended feedback obtained from students at University B, there were some concerns regarding the time commitment required. Specifically, some students expressed that the resource’s length and time requirements did not allow them to balance priority academic commitments effectively. As a result, it is suggested that adaptations to shorten the resources across programs may improve both learning and the learning experience. Regarding the categorization of feedback responses, items were categorized for question 1 according to the enjoyment of using personal devices, the enjoyment of the learning topics, and the enjoyment of collaboration during learning. Meanwhile, items related to question 2 were classified by the time requirements and teacher settings installed on the digital platform, which some students perceived as a barrier to their progress. Finally, suggestions made for question 3 included the removal of such settings on the digital platform, the increase of collaboration activities, and the reduction of task length and numbers. Overall, the survey results showed that students believed that self-access learning was a useful approach to learning.

Comparing Programs Based on Findings

Students in both programs expressed awareness of the complexity of culture and the need to avoid stereotyping individuals based on national cultures. Both sets of students also recognized multiple voices

within any cultural grouping and expressed connections with others, with some examples of focusing less on basic cultural differences. In terms of Global Englishes, students from both universities reported new confidence using English and a focus on communication over adherence to standard norms. There were changes in the presurvey and postsurvey responses indicating that the content had led to some new learning. One difference between the universities is that students from University B indicated more understanding of Global Englishes, likely because they have spent more hours studying English and use English more often out of class. In both programs, there were similarities in students' understanding but some differences in the degree to which these ideas were understood and applied. Students affiliated with both universities engaged with self-access learning using their own devices, which was reported positively, particularly in terms of collaborative learning opportunities as conducive to the exchange of ideas. However, there were also reservations regarding self-access learning voiced at both universities based on competing academic demands, serving as a call for instructional simplification and the removal of learning constraints that might hinder effective self-access learning.

Discussion

Integration Into the Current Literature

In the reflections from both universities, some students separated individuals from their national cultures, and there was nonessentialist awareness of individuals as multidimensional (Holliday et al., 2021). Students also reflected on their own relationships with their national cultures and reported changes in perspectives of how their own identities linked to national cultures. In addition, connections and commonalities were identified with others, reflecting ICA Level 2 (Baker, 2015), that is, a complex understanding of culture beyond national cultural characterisations. In this way, the findings support ICA research highlighting Level 2 for intercultural learning in educational contexts (e.g., Abdzadeh & Baker, 2020; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018; Yu & van Maele, 2018). Some Global Englishes learning was seen in a reconceptualisation of English language use in reported new perspectives towards “errors” and what constituted effective English language use. There were also reports of ELF understanding, and willingness to engage in ELF practices, which was connected to reports of increased confidence using English in communication. These understandings challenged views of English as singular. The integration of Global Englishes in these resources is potentially important to combine a focus on complexity in identities with a focus on complexity of English language practices among different individuals (e.g., Rose & Galloway, 2019).

On self-access student engagement and achievement of learning outcomes, students in both programs indicated engagement with the learning content; therefore, both sets of resources were at least partially effective as self-contained learning options. However, criticism particularly concerned a preference for more collaboration in learning/engagement. Among University B students, there was also criticism over length, indicating that engagement was, at times, affected by other study requirements. There was also some indication that self-access learning was not desired by all students as there were reports of preference for more collaborative learning (e.g., online exchanges, forums, etc.) as in related research (e.g., Keranen & Bayyurt, 2006; Lee & Markey, 2014; Schenker, 2012). Interaction with resources was not universally effective since few students selected to use the resources, and several students did not complete all tasks. Self-access learning in both settings appeared to offer some flexibility in learning. In University B, more time was required to engage with the resources, reflect, and process information. On the short-form resources, there was more limited exposure to culture learning as there was less time to focus on this form of learning, in general, in the programs (based on the researcher's perspective). It may, however, serve as a steppingstone for further intercultural learning. It should also be noted that engagement in self-access learning can vary depending on individual factors such as learning style and goals.

Limitations

The small sample size in this research (15 in each university) is problematic for representativeness in the kind of statistical data presented in this article. As such, it is difficult to draw reliable conclusions or identify meaningful differences and relationships in the data. However, the overall research did not seek generalisability through its survey-based data. Other limitations should be noted with the close-ended item survey, particularly in the possibility that responses are made based on consideration of teacher preferences, possible bias in predetermined categorisation of items the researcher selected as important, and the extent of engagement in deep thinking around these items. However, this survey was not designed for replication but as a supplementary data source next to the more in-depth qualitative study of the reflections. Also, in this form of research, there are risks that student expressions may be guided by their perceptions of teacher expectations. The self-reported nature of these findings is another limitation, although it also enabled access to personal perspectives through which students could potentially provide insight into their personal experiences and thoughts. This kind of research also risks appearing overly positive regarding learning outcomes, though there is some consideration of alternative explanations and potential sources of bias in the research. Since findings are based on researcher interpretations of reflections, there are concerns around power balance between the researcher (and resource designer) and how the perspectives of the students involved are represented. Any imbalance in the research is heightened by the positionality of the researcher as a British native English speaker looking into these research areas in a Japanese context. This positionality is acknowledged by the researcher as impacting on this process and the findings, but the researcher has not sought to make bold statements but to contribute to discourse on how digital resources in the area of self-access may be effective. It is up to readers to draw their own conclusions as to any meaning the researcher has interpreted from the research process by reflecting on how these findings may be relevant to other contexts. The results offer an educational example of potential relevance to other contexts where there may be expectations around intercultural learning, Global Englishes, and self-access learning.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The development of digital educational resources in self-access offers a potential solution to the calls for ELT to integrate intercultural learning aspects (Byram, 2021) and to represent Global Englishes in the learning process (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Theoretical implications of these findings include the potential for self-access learning resources to facilitate intercultural learning in terms of ICA, understandings of culture as complex, and recognising multiple voices within cultural groupings. The findings also suggest that exposure to Global Englishes through self-access learning resources can lead to new language and communication perspectives, particularly in relation to ELF awareness, and increased confidence in using English for communication. Overall, these findings suggest that self-access learning resources can be an effective tool for promoting learning in these areas, though there are practical considerations. These considerations include the use of shorter, collaborative resources in digital intercultural education, the incorporation of reflective opportunities, regardless of task length or language. National labels may be used by students when reflecting on culture, but these may still be useful in expressions of individual perspectives towards ICA Level 2. It is important for practitioners to avoid any tendency to consider particular worldviews as “correct” and to acknowledge a range of valid responses. Teachers should also consider that students may offer reflections based on what they perceive teachers want rather than offering alternatives. Finally, it may be more effective to avoid any restrictions, such as time limits or teacher-required checks, to enable students to progress at their own pace. These practical recommendations are intended to promote student engagement and enhance the effectiveness of digital educational resources for intercultural learning and Global Englishes.

Conclusion

The key contribution of this article to established research is in its demonstration of how digital learning resources, conceptually based on ICA and Global Englishes, can be integrated for self-access learning. The researcher has outlined a conceptual framework and has advocated ICA and Global Englishes in educational design, in which these areas are integrated in digital educational self-access resources. Two sets of resources were developed, and the data showed that learning and user self-access learning experiences were similar among students in the two programs, though a preference for the short-form resources was noted, particularly based on the time requirements needed for the longer-form resources. The researcher has provided practical recommendations for practitioners to establish self-access digital learning in these areas, such as using shorter, collaborative resources and providing reflective opportunities. This article has shed light on students' perceptions and preferences towards self-access digital learning, including their positive attitudes towards collaborative aspects and reflective opportunities, and criticism towards restrictions such as time limits and teacher-required checks.

In the investigation of learning and learning experiences through digital resources for self-access, there is value in the research in its contribution to the discourses on self-access digital resource use, few of which combine intercultural learning with a Global Englishes orientation. This article provides a basis for other investigations into how intercultural and Global Englishes learning can be supported through other instructional approaches looking at how these areas, when integrated, may be effective across educational contexts. Indeed, there is a need for pedagogically focused research in a range of contexts that explore how new resources such as those outlined in this article lead to insight elsewhere. Practitioners should consider how any new educational developments in these areas may contribute insight by sharing findings in other pedagogically focused papers.

References

- Abdzadeh, Y., & Baker, W. (2020). Cultural awareness in an Iranian English language classroom: A teaching intervention in an intercultural “conservative” setting. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 9(1), 57–80. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2020-2030>
- Ashwin, P., & McVitty, D. (2015). The meanings of student engagement: Implications for policies and practices. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European higher education area: Between critical reflections and future policies* (pp. 343–359). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_23
- Awidi, I. T., & Paynter, M. (2022). An evaluation of the impact of digital technology innovations on students’ learning: Participatory research using a student-centred approach. *Technology, Knowledge & Learning*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-022-09619-5>
- Baker, W. (2012). *Using e-learning to develop intercultural awareness in ELT: A critical education in a Thai higher education setting*. British Council.
- Baker, W. (2015). *Culture and identity through English as a Lingua Franca: Rethinking concepts and goals in intercultural communication*. De Gruyter.
- Benson, P. (2017). Language learning beyond the classroom: Access all areas. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 8(2), 135–146. <https://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun2017/benson/>.
- Byram, M. (2021). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence revisited*. Multilingual Matters.
- De Wit, H. (2020). The future of internationalization of higher education in challenging global contexts. *ETD Educação Temática Digital*, 22(3), 538–545. <https://doi.org/10.20396/etd.v22i3.8659471>
- Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 7(2), 95–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001>
- Herrera Díaz, L. E. (2012). Self-access language learning: Students’ perceptions of and experiences within this new mode of learning. *Profile: Issues in Teachers’ Professional Development*, 14(1), 113–127. <https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/profile/article/view/29061>
- Holliday, A., Hyde, M., & Kullman, J. (2021). *Intercultural communication: An advanced resource book for students* (4th ed.) Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367482480>
- Hrastinski, S. (2008). Asynchronous and synchronous e-learning. *Educause Quarterly*, 4, 51–55. https://er.educause.edu/-/media/files/article_downloads/eqm0848.pdf
- Humphreys, G. (2021). Planning, implementing, and evaluating a non-essentialist training programme for study abroad in the Japanese HE context. *Intercultural Communication Education*, 4(2), 155–176. <https://doi.org/10.29140/ice.v4n2.436>
- Jenkins, J. (2015). Repositioning English and multilingualism in English as a lingua franca. *Englishes in Practice*, 2(3), 49–85. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eip-2015-0003>
- Kachru, B. B., Kachru, Y., & Nelson, C. L. (2006). *The handbook of world Englishes*. Blackwell.
- Keranen, N., & Bayyurt, Y. (2006). Intercultural telecollaboration: In-service EFL teachers in Mexico and pre-service EFL teachers in Turkey. *TESL-EJ*, 10(3), 1–50. <http://tesl-ej.org/ej39/a1.html>

- Kongchan, C., Darasawang, P. (2015). Roles of self-access centres in the success of language learning. In P. Darasawang, H. Reinders (Eds.), *Innovation in language learning and teaching: New language learning and teaching environments* (pp. 76–88). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137449757_6
- Kusumaningputri, R., & Widodo, H. P. (2018). Promoting Indonesian university students' critical intercultural awareness in tertiary EAL classrooms: The use of digital photograph-mediated intercultural tasks. *System*, 72, 49–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.10.003>
- Leask, B. (2015). *Internationalizing the curriculum*. Routledge.
- Lee, L., & Markey, A. (2014). A study of learners' perceptions of online intercultural exchange through Web 2.0 technologies. *ReCALL*, 26(3), 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344014000111>
- McMurry, B. L., Tanner, M. W., & Anderson, N. J. (2010). Self-access centers: Maximizing learners' access to center resources. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 1(2), 100–114. <https://doi.org/10.37237/010204>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Mynard, J. (2019). Self-access learning and advising: Promoting language learner autonomy beyond the classroom. In H. Reinders, S. Ryan, & S. Nakamura (Eds.), *Innovation in language teaching and learning: New language learning and teaching environments* (pp. 185–209). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12567-7_10
- Perna, L. W., Ruby, A., Boruch, R. F., Wang, N., Scull, J., Ahmad, S., & Evans, C. (2014). Moving through MOOCs: Understanding the progression of users in massive open online courses. *Educational Researcher*, 43(9), 421–432. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0013189X14562423>
- Rose, H., & Galloway, N. (2019). *Global Englishes for language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rubesch, T., & Barrs, K. (2014). Supporting a physical self-access center with a virtual presence. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 5(1), 42–49. <https://doi.org/10.37237/050104>
- Schenker, T. (2013). Intercultural competence and cultural learning through telecollaboration. *CALICO Journal*, 29(3), 449–470. <https://doi.org/10.11139/cj.29.3.449-470>
- Trinidad, J. E., & Ngo, G. R. (2019). Technology's roles in student-centred learning in higher education. *International Journal of Action Research*, 15(1), 81–94. <https://doi.org/10.3224/ijar.v15i1.06>
- Väätäjä, J. O., & Ruokamo, H. (2021). Conceptualizing dimensions and a model for digital pedagogy. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 15, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F183449092199539>
- Yamada, R. (2014). Japanese higher education: Policies and future issues. In R. Yamada (Ed.), *Measuring quality of undergraduate education in Japan* (pp. 17–34). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4585-81-1_2
- Yu, Q., & van Maele, J. (2018). Fostering intercultural awareness in a Chinese English reading class. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 41, 357–375. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cjal-2018-0027>

Higher Learning Research Communications (HLRC) is a peer-reviewed, online, interdisciplinary journal indexed in Scopus, ERIC, JGATE, and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). It is an open access journal with an international focus published by Walden University, USA. Its aim is to disseminate both high quality research and teaching best practices in tertiary education across cultures and disciplines. *HLRC* connects the ways research and best practice contribute to the public good and impact the communities that educators serve. *HLRC* articles include peer-reviewed research reports, research briefs, comprehensive literature reviews, and books reviews.