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## Facilitating Intercultural Communicative Competence through Student-Conducted Ethnographic Research in a Minority Religious Community in Japan



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### Abstract

Against the backdrop of religious hostilities worldwide, there is a pressing need to increase intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the domain of religion. While there is a growing body of scholarship concerning interreligious dialogue, particularly in the field of peacebuilding, less is known about the contribution that universities can make towards facilitating religious understanding through intercultural education. Student-conducted ethnography, which has been shown to promote the learning of sociocultural beliefs and practices, holds significant potential for learning in this area. The present study explores this potential by examining the experiences of 16 undergraduate Japanese university students who completed an ethnographic assignment in a minority religious community. The students engaged in participant observation at international Christian churches in Japan to deepen their understanding of how religion is manifested in practice. They documented their findings in ethnographic reports which underwent deductive qualitative content analysis according to categories drawn from Byram's (1997) model of ICC. Analysis found that ethnography played a significant role in supporting classroom learning cognitively and affectively: students' reports demonstrated enhanced knowledge regarding the theory and practice of Christianity, and favorable attitudes toward the community members. Nevertheless, perceptions of difference remained, with some students exhibiting an essentialized notion of their home culture. While previous studies of student ethnography have mainly been conducted in the context of language learning, the present study extends this knowledge to the context of learning about religion. It offers a pedagogical model to intercultural educators aiming to facilitate interreligious understanding in higher education.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communicative competence, ethnography, interreligious competence, religion, Japan

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## Introduction

The cultivation of intercultural understanding is of crucial concern for educators in the present age of fractious international relations and cross-cultural tensions. While this holds true in the domains of nationality, ethnicity, language, and politics, it also applies in the domain of religion. Religious tensions in societies worldwide have been increasing in recent years even as globalization has been on the rise. A study by the Pew Research Center (2025) found that government restrictions on religion worldwide hit peak levels in 2021 and 2022, while the number of countries with high or very high social hostilities involving religion also rose. Social hostilities can take many forms, from atrocity crimes and physical violence to microaggressions and othering. The plight of religious minorities is of particular concern, as their status as a minority makes them especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of majority sentiment. Religious groups that face discrimination not only belong to the world's minor religions (e.g., Baha'is, Yazidis, and Falun Gong), but also the world's major religions when they are in the minority, such as Muslims and Jews in the US (Scheitle & Ecklund, 2020) and Christians and Hindus in Pakistan (Alam, 2022).

In light of this, there is a need to strengthen social cohesion and promote understanding and tolerance in the area of religious belief. Some educators have called for intercultural and interreligious education to be formally integrated into educational systems (e.g., Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasised the need for educational institutions to battle discrimination and marginalization based on religion and other social markers (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Although there seems to be a consensus on the importance of cultivating interreligious understanding, the problem remains as to how this can be done effectively. This is a problem to which intercultural communication educators can make a significant contribution, as there is a strong link between the two. Both interreligious understanding and ICC are predominantly concerned with beliefs, behaviors, and meanings, and how individuals can better understand their own and those of their neighbors in order to rise above ethnocentrism and bigotry.

The aim of the present study is to explore the potential of an ethnographic task for fostering university students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the domain of religion. It fills a genuine gap in the literature as, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no extant research has examined student-produced ethnographies in religious minority communities. The context of the study is Japan, where Christianity is a minority religion, with Christians making up roughly 2% of the population (Zurlo, 2022). Historically, Christians suffered severe persecution in Japan, especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which included government prohibition, forced apostasy, torture, and execution (Chong et al., 2025). Today, while there is no overt social hostility towards Christians, adherents sometimes face passive discrimination through widespread distrust and antipathy towards religion in general (Introvigne, 2024). For instance, some pamphlets distributed by schools to children in Japan were found to reinforce discriminatory stereotypes about religious minorities and caused the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR, 2025) to express concern.

This study examines the case of university students studying Christian culture in Japan. It addresses the following research question: In what ways can an ethnographic task in a minority religious community help shape intercultural communicative competence? It aims to contribute to theoretical knowledge by applying an existing model of intercultural competence to the domain of religion in order to guide pedagogical practice that can facilitate interreligious understanding.

## Literature Review

### Intercultural Communicative Competence

The theoretical understanding of culture adopted for this study is that of cultures as practices (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This understanding rejects the notion that cultures can be clearly demarcated by

geopolitical boundaries or group markings and denies that cultural attributes are stable, coherent, and uniform amongst all their members. Rather, culture is understood in terms of practices that are enacted by individuals in context and so are dynamic and emergent. The shared meanings among group members, while usually coherent and agreed upon, can also be “fragmented, contradictory, and contested” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 21) due to the fact that these meanings are created by situated individuals in interaction.

The close relationship between religion and culture has been recognized from as far back as Max Weber (1904/2002), who argued that culture took the form of Christian doctrine (Calvinism) to shape capitalist economic behavior. Religious communities are deemed to be a culture because, just like other manifestations of culture, they have shared beliefs, behaviors, and meanings that act as boundary markers for the community. Culture, like religion, can be seen to consist of symbolic vehicles for meaning, such as “beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). Intercultural education, therefore, necessarily entails religious education (Beyers, 2017).

There are a number of theoretical frameworks that can help explain dimensions of intercultural competence, such as the Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006) and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1986, 1993), and at least one model of interreligious competence (Morgan & Sandage, 2016). These models are developmental, and so useful for showing change over time. The present study is only indirectly concerned with competency development, however, and mainly concerned with capturing how the multi-faceted dimensions of ICC are revealed in an ethnographic report, as a representation of students’ observations and emerging understandings. Previous studies on students as ethnographers have demonstrated the utility of Byram’s model of ICC (Byram, 1997) for this purpose (e.g. Dasli & Sangster, 2023; Fernández-Benavides et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2001).

Although frequently used in intercultural education research, Byram’s model has also been subject to criticism. Dasli and Sangster (2023) argued that this model equates culture with country and therefore leads students to generalize about cultural issues to the entire population of those countries. Hoff (2020) has also highlighted some weaknesses of Byram’s ICC model, with the central issue being that it can be seen as instrumental and performance-based, and thus unable to reflect the complexities of modern-day intercultural communication. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve deeper into these issues, but interested readers can see Byram’s response to critics in his revised monograph (Byram, 2021). Despite the criticisms, Hoff argued; “one of the advantages of Byram’s model is that it is concrete and, for the most part, coherent” (2020, p. 68), and therefore useful for pedagogical purposes if some modifications are made, including (1) giving attention to English as a *lingua franca*, and (2) cultivating learners as intercultural *readers*.

With these criticisms in mind, the present study adapted and augmented Byram’s (1997) model to better fit its application to the domain of religion. While this model has often been applied in the learning of foreign languages, the present study is the first time the model has been applied to student ethnography in a religious culture. The model distinguishes five factors that can be used as conceptual windows through which to gain a multifaceted understanding of ICC. The factors are described below, along with an explanation of how they were operationalized to fit a religious context.

The first factor is attitudes (or *savoir être*), which concerns the level of curiosity about and openness towards other cultures, and the ability to suspend judgment on others’ beliefs and behaviors. Many of the world’s religions have unique practices that may seem peculiar to the uninitiated, potentially leading to prejudiced or stereotyped ideas. This factor is operationalized within the domain of religion

to refer to someone who has an interest in discovering other perspectives on spiritual truths, while also reflecting upon the values and presuppositions of their own religious practices. Essential attitudes for intercultural competence that are particularly salient for the religious domain include humility (Murray-Garcia & Tervalon, 2017) and empathy (Calloway-Thomas et al., 2017). Previous research suggests that attitudes towards religion are related to personality factors, with students in the US being more positive towards Christianity if they displayed higher levels of conformity, tendermindedness, and self-discipline (Bourke et al., 2007). Students are also more likely to have positive attitudes towards religion if they are generally happy and satisfied with life, and have been exposed to religion through family, friends, and significant others (Wang et al., 2019).

The second is knowledge (or *savoir*), which is divided into two domains: knowledge of sociocultural practices and knowledge of interaction processes. Religious beliefs are often expressed through practices such as festivals, music, food, attire, and attendance at places of worship. Understanding how others make meaning of these practices, together with the rules of interaction between individuals engaged in religious activities, promotes peaceful co-existence and reduces ethno-religious acts of violence (see, for example, the case of Buneng villagers in Indonesia in Eko and Putranto, 2019). Lindsay (2020) argued that this factor of knowledge is the foundation upon which intercultural and interreligious competence (IC/IR competence) can be built because knowledge is less resistant to change than skills and attitudes, so is less psychologically invasive and stressful. Moreover, Lindsay argued that this knowledge can be best acquired in the classroom.

The third factor of ICC is the skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*). This refers to the ability to understand a document or event from another culture, and to be able to explain its relationship to documents and events in one's own culture. Religious documents may entail holy writings (or scriptures), teachings from religious leaders, song lyrics, prayers, or even YouTube videos. Being able to interpret events from a foreign religious standpoint would not only involve the major events in one's personal life, such as birth, marriage, illness, and death, but also political and social events, such as government elections, wars, natural disasters, and economic downturns. A high level of ICC would enable one to identify how different religious systems interpret such phenomena and to mediate through misunderstandings.

Hoff's notion of the "intercultural reader" (Hoff, 2016) is a helpful supplement here to Byram's "intercultural speaker". This is because the ICC model does not draw attention to the reading of foreign texts as intercultural communication in its own right (Hoff, 2020). All the world's religions have holy texts (scriptures, prayers, chants, sutras, etc.) and texts that inspire and support faith (ancient writings, modern religious books, films, songs, etc.) which aim to communicate a message. A student with a high level of ICC would be able to engage with these texts at three overlapping levels: multiple voices within the text, multiple readers, and other texts. They would be able to explore how representations of the religion are "constantly manipulated, reframed and recontextualized" (Hoff, 2020, p. 64). Properly understanding a Christian community requires acknowledging the importance given to the biblical text as a site for intercultural communication. This may entail engaging critically with the different episodes and characters in the Bible, observing how modern Christians read and make sense of the Bible, and being aware of how the Bible is represented in sociopolitical discourse and pop culture.

Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*) is the fourth factor of ICC. This concerns the acquisition of new knowledge and also the application of knowledge, attitudes, and skills during real-time interaction. A person with these skills would be able to speak with a religious adherent for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge, engaging in appropriate verbal and non-verbal interaction in order to make meaning of religious practice. One criticism of Byram's model is that it does not adequately take into account diversified speakership, mainly focusing on native-speaker communities. Therefore,

Hoff (2020) suggested placing a greater emphasis on the use of language as a *lingua franca* spoken among people from diverse backgrounds. Skills of discovery and interaction would therefore include the use of language in settings where cultural practices are emergent and contested. Additionally, these skills would enable a person to identify and make use of religious institutions to facilitate contact with people from other cultures. In a community that is religiously diverse, these skills of interaction are needed to promote social cohesion and individual wellbeing, as has been observed with workers in the areas of health and public services (Fernández de Casadevante, 2023; Swihart et al., 2025; Whitley, 2012), and is important even if the workers themselves are not religious (Morgan & Sandage, 2016).

The fifth factor in this model of ICC is critical cultural awareness (*savoir engager*). This refers to an ability to critically evaluate the perspectives, practices, and products of particular cultures, including one's own. Since Byram first proposed his model, he has developed this factor to align with the aims of fostering social justice and developing intercultural citizenship (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Critical cultural awareness involves the application of rational and explicit criteria, so that any judgments made have a basis in reasoned argument and critical thinking. This factor rejects the notion that all religions have equal worth and that all truths should be accepted without criticism. There is a great variety of religious systems in the world, and each is able to be evaluated according to criteria such as how well they enable human flourishing, how closely they align to scientific understandings of reality, and to what extent they promote social cohesion and psychological wellbeing.

### Student-Conducted Ethnography for Intercultural Learning

As a genre, the characteristics of ethnography are rather loose, and there is no set of rigid criteria that define the nature of an ethnographic study and distinguish it from other forms of qualitative enquiry (Dörnyei, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The data collection process is described by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019):

*Ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts—in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry. (p. 3)*

These data may take a variety of forms, such as photographs, drawings, gestures, rituals, and facial and body language. However, the bulk of these data are gathered through the form of language: spoken conversations, questions, answers, written documents, and so on.

Jordan (2002) argued for the educational value of ethnographic study in that it can produce processes and opportunities for cultural translation, which she defined as “everything that goes into committed acts of understanding and of clear and determined telling” (p. 101). Jordan understands the value of doing cultural translation as not limited to one particular culture, but as providing a general framework that can be applied in all encounters with difference. These encounters take place in third spaces, which may be found on foreign soil, at home, and online.

Concerning foreign soil ethnography, there have been a number of studies into how it may promote intercultural learning. Findings, however, have been mixed. Roberts et al.'s (2001) seminal work used Byram's model of ICC to frame an investigation into language students as ethnographers. They found that ethnographic work while studying abroad facilitated four broad categories of learning: local social and cultural knowledge; processes of interrogation and relativization; observation, social interaction, and analytic skills; and personal development. In contrast, Dasli and Sangster (2023) found that students

who had been trained according to Byram's model of ICC benefited little from ethnographic work. After spending one academic year abroad, the students' perceptions of the host culture remained derogatory, and that generalizations about the foreign other remained almost intact. Dasli and Sangster see the cause as stemming from ethnographic methodology itself, which may encourage researchers to make generalizations, and from their students being trained according to Byram's model of ICC, which they argued equates culture with country.

Regarding home ethnography, studies have shown it to be effective in producing a positive attitude towards the target community and cultural learning in general. Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) studied students of Spanish in the US who conducted ethnographic interviews with Spanish speakers. They found that students' attitude towards the study of Spanish improved, and that their knowledge of Spanish culture and their own culture increased. In a replication study, Bateman (2002) reported similar findings, showing that students benefited cognitively and affectively. They learned various facts about Hispanic cultures and seemed to have an enhanced empathy for and understanding of the community.

In the online context, scholarship has shown how students can conduct ethnography through digital means, such as examining online photos, videos, and social networking sites (Berti, 2020) and through online international exchange (OIE) (Wang & Miao, 2020). O'Dowd (2005) used OIE to facilitate student ethnography through videoconferencing and email. His findings showed that online ethnography enabled students to develop skills of discovery and interaction, but the development of critical cultural awareness was lacking.

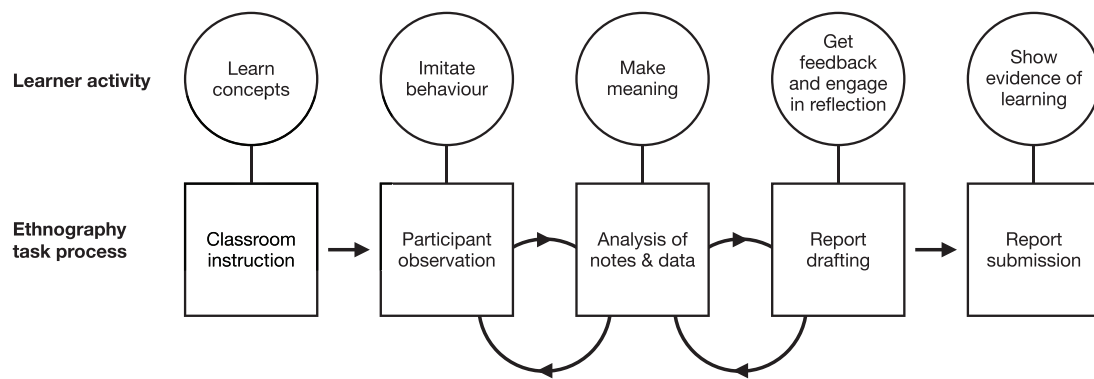
There has been, therefore, a certain amount of scholarly interest shown in investigating the value of student-conducted ethnography for intercultural learning. The present paper aims to contribute to this area of study by examining an ethnography task with two contextual features that are currently under-researched: (1) that of a local minority community, and (2) that of religious belief as an identity marker rather than language or nationality.

## Method

### Overview of the Study

The present study addresses the question: In what ways can an ethnographic task in a minority religious community help shape intercultural communicative competence? It does this by examining written ethnographic reports produced by students enrolled in a *Christianity and Culture* course at a non-religious private university in central Japan. It takes a constructivist epistemological stance, considering ICC to be a socially constructed phenomenon that can be understood through subjective experience. Students' written accounts of their experiences are treated as interpretive constructions of meaning, rather than objective accounts of reality, which are contextual and subjective (Schreier, 2012). This aligns with conventional educational research that views experience as storied and meaning as constructed through narrative expression (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The course in this study ran for 15 weeks, with the first half focused on key theoretical concepts of the Christian religion: mainly, the Bible, God, humanity, sin, creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. The second half of the course focused on particular cultural expressions that have been influenced by Christian ideas, such as movies, music, art, literature, science, and politics. The course followed a hard CLIL (content and language integrated learning) approach, and so was taught mainly in English, with occasional commentary and some readings provided in Japanese. Classroom learning aimed to develop students' knowledge of Christian sociocultural practices and knowledge of interaction processes, the second factor of ICC. The ethnographic process is illustrated below (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1** *Learner Activity in Ethnographic Research*

During the first seven lessons, students received classroom instruction in the core concepts of Christianity. The eighth lesson was devoted to the theory and practice of ethnography. Students were taught the principles and the process of conducting ethnographic research and practiced observation and note-taking at a location on campus. In the following weeks students engaged in participant observation at a church meeting. Essentially, this fieldwork component was founded upon a pedagogical strategy of encounter, dialogue, and engagement, which Gill (2016) maintained is the bedrock for intercultural learning and interreligious understanding. This strategy was manifested in two ways. Firstly, students were instructed not to be fly-on-the-wall observers of the church but to participate actively with the group, imitating the behavior of the church members in order to gain an embodied understanding of practice. This typically entailed singing, praying, listening to a sermon, and engaging in customary social interactions. Secondly, volunteers from each church group made themselves available for dialogue after the service. Students were able to ask questions, test their understandings, and get feedback on their interpretations of what they had observed. As ethnography is intensely practical and situational, each given set of circumstances comes with its own unique challenges, and so one cannot decide strict methodological procedures beforehand (O'Reilly, 2011). Therefore, students were not given precise directions to follow but encouraged to use their initiative and follow their instincts when gathering data. The fourth factor of ICC, skills of discovery and interaction, came in to play when learner-researchers engaged in conversations and interviews with informants in the church.

The next step in the process was to analyze the notes they had taken in order to make meaning of their observations. Classroom time was given for students to compare notes with each other and discuss their understandings. Students drew upon their skills of interpreting and relating (the third factor of ICC) and their ability for critical cultural evaluation (the fifth factor of ICC) when they synthesized their notes and wrote the ethnographic report. The looped arrows in Figure 1 indicate that making sense of notes and data was an iterative process that overlapped with participant observation and report drafting. The teacher read students' draft reports to provide feedback and prompt further investigation if needed. The teacher also encouraged students to be truthful and direct in their reporting, not attempting to paint everything in a positive light. Finally, students submitted their final reports to provide evidence of learning.

### Context

Altogether, three churches were available as sites for the ethnography, known here as Seed Church, Nations Church, and Park Church. All three were Protestant churches and consisted of mixed nationality congregations. Seed Church held a contemporary bilingual service in a modern rented building

space and was characterized by many youth and young families. Nations Church met in the chapel of a seminary building, also holding a bilingual service, and was characterized as slightly older and more conservative. Park Church was unique in that it was run by missionaries from Norway, Germany, and the US, and its members consisted of homeless people. This church was held in a local park on Saturday. Although the service itself was conducted in Japanese, the interactions among staff were in English, and the students conducted their interviews with the staff in English. All three churches consisted of people from multiple countries and with various home languages, who gathered together in Japan to form a community. Having students visit these communities aligns well with calls to place language teaching in a transnational and global context (e.g., Risager, 2007). In these churches, the English language is not owned solely by people from Western English-speaking countries, but is the shared resource of all the members, whether they be from Asia, Latin America, Africa, or elsewhere.

Extended time in the field has been a principle of traditional ethnography, and so it was desirable for students to visit the church on multiple occasions. However, the practical realities of the course only made possible a single visit. Nevertheless, contemporary approaches to ethnography allow for limited field time when extended time is impractical (e.g., Wall, 2015). Millen (2000) argued that even with limited time, the essential nature of the method is able to be preserved through constraining the research focus, using key informants, engaging in interactive observation techniques, and analyzing the data collaboratively. Accordingly, students were directed to narrow their research focus to one particular aspect of the church meeting, informants were key church members, participant observation was employed, and data were shared and discussed in groups during class time as students collectively made sense of their observations.

## **Participants**

All students who completed the course were sent an email and invited to participate in this study. As the course had already ended and two months elapsed, it is unknown how many students read the invitation, but 16 out of 34 responded positively and gave their voluntary written consent for their report to be used as data. Only two of these students identified as being Christian, but as they were from a Christian tradition different from the churches where they conducted fieldwork, they were engaged in a genuine encounter with an unknown community. During the course, students received training in the principles and the process of ethnography and practiced observation and note-taking at a location on campus. Following that, each student attended a local Christian church once and participated in their regular service. Permission to attend from each church leader was obtained beforehand by the course instructor, and each student was paired with a church member after the service to conduct an interview.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In adherence to the requirements of the ethical review board, data collection was conducted after the course had been completed and grades already assigned, to ensure that students were under no duress to participate. The reports of all consenting students were anonymized and subjected to a process of qualitative content analysis. Firstly, the reports were segmented into meaning units. A meaning unit was defined as a discrete segment of text with a dominant idea or theme relevant to the concept of ICC and suitable for coding. Unit boundaries were determined based on shifts in meaning, ensuring that coherence and contextual integrity were maintained, resulting in units of variable length. Subsequently, each unit was coded according to categories drawn from Byram's (1997) five-fold model of ICC, as shown in Table 1. For example, the sentence "I had been wanting to hear from people of faith for some time, so I asked questions about baptism and about believing in God" was designated as two meaning units, the first clause coded at 1 (Attitudes) and the second clause at 4 (Skills of Discovery/Interaction).

**Table 1** *Coding Scheme*

|   | Code                                                              | Operational definitions                                                                                                                         |
|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Attitudes ( <i>Savoir-être</i> )                                  | A willingness to engage the church with curiosity, openness, empathy, and humility                                                              |
| 2 | Knowledge ( <i>Savoir</i> )                                       | An awareness of sociocultural norms and values, Christian beliefs, and church features                                                          |
| 3 | Skills of Interpreting/Relating ( <i>Savoir comprendre</i> )      | Ability to juxtapose cultural phenomena and contextualize observed behavior in the church                                                       |
| 4 | Skills of Discovery/Interaction ( <i>Savoir apprendre/faire</i> ) | Ability to conduct systematic cultural observation, employ ethnographic methods, and establish rapport                                          |
| 5 | Critical Cultural Awareness ( <i>Savoir s'engager</i> )           | Ability to critically evaluate the perspectives, practices, and products in the church and one's own culture; engagement in reflexive practices |

Next, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) was employed to assist with the assignment of codes. The use of GenAI for qualitative data analysis is a relatively recent phenomenon, but so far, the results suggest that it is effective when used in concert with a human researcher and subjected to rigorous human oversight (e.g., Feng, 2024; Khalifa & Albadawy, 2024; Williams, 2024). There are some potential limitations when using GenAI for deductive coding, however. For example, using a fixed coding scheme may cause GenAI to overlook nuanced or unexpected data that do not cleanly apply to predetermined codes, biases in the coding scheme may be reinforced, and poorly designed prompts may lead to inaccurate or incomplete coding. Therefore, the most effective strategy is a hybrid approach that integrates human expertise with GenAI capabilities. ChatGPT-4o was used in the current study, as it was found to be highly effective when used for deductive qualitative data analysis (Pattyn, 2025).

Firstly, ChatGPT-4o was trained in the ICC model. It was fed an explanation of the concepts and given the a priori coding scheme used by the researcher. Then, it coded the data, and the results were compared with those of the researcher. While there was a meaningful degree of consistency, some variation inevitably arose. A second human coder was tasked with adjudicating the discrepancies that had arisen. This coder was trained in the coding scheme and read through all the areas of contention, applying the most appropriate code to each meaning unit in consultation with the researcher. In this way, through a process of negotiated agreement, all the data were coded. Finally, the meaning units within each coding category were grouped together and underwent a thematic analysis, which allowed themes to emerge from within each factor of ICC. These themes were consequently synthesized in a systematic process, progressing from descriptive to analytical themes.

## Findings

### Attitudes

In order to create conditions that facilitate ICC, a pedagogical task should aim to inspire positive attitudes in students as they engage with the foreign culture. Overall, student reports indicated that students had a positive attitude towards the church and towards the ethnographic assignment. It was noted of the fieldwork that, “It was a really good experience for me” (MU 2.15), “I had a fulfilling experience without any worries” (MU 3.11), and “It was a very valuable and meaningful opportunity” (MU 7.15). This positive experience led to an attitude of gratitude towards the church community for welcoming them, and also to a desire to learn more. One student commented that the fieldwork had “sparked[ed]

my interest in exploring other Protestant churches” (MU 14.08), and another, “By attending the meeting, I got interested in how believing in God helped or changed people’s lives” (MU 4.07).

One important theme that emerged in the attitude domain was the correction of faulty assumptions. Several students expressed “surprise” at aspects of the church meeting which were very different from what they expected. One student wrote, “Before I went to the church, I have an image that everyone is stay in silence and pray for a long time. Nevertheless, my image changed a lot after I participated in the church” (MU 2.04), while another wrote, “This relaxed, casual atmosphere was far from my original impression of church services, which I had expected to be more solemn” (MU 3.01).

However, while students’ beliefs about Christian culture were challenged, beliefs about their own culture were not. Comments such as, “(Japan is a place) where not only Christianity but also religion itself is unfamiliar” (MU 5.03), and “Being Japanese and not affiliated with religion, I was initially nervous” (MU 7.05) is representative of another theme that emerged from the data: an attitude towards religion that was predicated on being “Japanese”. The data indicate a mindset that associates being Japanese with being non-religious. This cultural bias did not seem to be challenged, despite the fact that there were many Japanese people present in all the churches. None of the students expressed surprise that so many Japanese people were in attendance, nor that their idea of Japanese people being uninterested in religion had been challenged.

“Christian people” were considered different from “Japanese people”, even when noting similarities. For example: “I was especially pleased to find that Japanese people have a spirit of faith similar to Christians” (MU 7.15). The implication is that Japanese people are not Christians. Likewise, another commented, “Through this fieldwork, I was able to deepen my understanding of what I had learned in class and experience firsthand the differences between Japanese and other religious beliefs” (MU 8.06). This comment suggests that Christianity is an “other religious belief” which is mutually exclusive to being “Japanese”; in other words, to be Christian entails not being Japanese, even though all the churches had significant Japanese members.

Attitudes can be shaped by feelings, and an important theme in the data was students’ emotional responses. Comments included: “I could feel the passion of all of them who was in the church” (MU 2.15); “I could see all homeless people listening to them eagerly and I could feel their efforts” (MU 16.08); and “I felt the warmth of the people” (MU 5.08). It was often noted in the data that feelings of warm hospitality and kindness from the church helped to assuage initial nervousness and apprehension at being in an unfamiliar environment. Such positive emotional responses appeared to shape a favorable attitude towards the community and inspire empathy towards the group members.

## **Knowledge**

The students’ reports showed evidence that knowledge of Christian sociocultural practices and interaction processes had been shaped through the fieldwork. This knowledge predominantly concerned aspects of church ceremony and formalities, such as prayer, worship, preaching, holy communion, and fellowship. For example, one student learned that “Hymns are prayers set to music and are sung during the service” (MU 14.04), and another that during the service, participants “sang hymns aloud or read from the Bible” (MU 11.05). Conventions such as ending a prayer by “closing with ‘Amen’” (MU 1.07) were also noted. Preaching as a social practice was observed to be relational, with the pastor “sharing Bible stories interwoven with humorous personal anecdotes, making the congregation laugh” (MU 3.09). The reports also demonstrated students’ knowledge of norms of interaction in church: closing eyes when praying, standing when singing, and taking notes when listening to a sermon.

In addition to knowledge of the outward forms of interaction, reports indicated that some knowledge was gained of the deeper underlying meaning and purposes of those practices. It was observed that “not only do they come to pray to God, but they also value the time spent connecting with others in the church, which has become very important to them” (MU 11.05). After noting the informal style of the church interior and casual attire of members, one student surmised, “This seems to reflect the church’s philosophy, which is to avoid creating a rigid, solemn atmosphere that could make it difficult for young children to participate” (MU 10.04). Their reports indicated that students were attempting to make sense of what they had observed by connecting their empirical observations with their conceptual knowledge of Christianity that had been constructed in the classroom.

Indeed, classroom preparation was an important theme that emerged in this factor of ICC. Students wrote that knowledge of sociocultural beliefs and practices that had been covered in class helped prepare them for participation in the community. One student noted, “As we learned in class, they offer thanks to God before meals and meditate regularly. They also put effort into spreading Christian teachings and incorporating them into daily life” (MU 10.06). This student had learned about the practice of saying grace before meals and “meditating” (praying) in the classroom, which facilitated her understanding of and discussion with church members.

### Interpreting and Relating

Two major themes that emerged within this category of ICC were the interpreting and relating of difference at the *inter*-cultural level as well as the *intra*-cultural level. At the first level, students related elements of the church culture with elements found in wider Japanese culture. One wrote, “The church welcomed everyone warmly, even non-Christians, in contrast to Japan’s often insular approach to religion” (MU 1.10). Another noted that one of the pastors took his job as a second career after retirement, “which is quite unusual in Japan. In Japan, monks and priests usually come from families with a religious background, so the idea of becoming one as a second career is not common” (MU 8.03). Similarities in relation to the dominant culture include the observation that Japanese people also “pray for luck and safety” (MU 7.12) and “erect graves to honor the dead” (MU 7.13). However, while the external behavior of praying and erecting graves may seem similar, the meaning behind these practices is very different for Christians and Japanese non-Christians, a fact which was not acknowledged by the student.

One of the students who attended the Park church expressed a deepening understanding of homeless culture, which he could relate to homeless culture in other countries. The Park church consisted of those at the intersection of two minority groups: both Christian and homeless. He reflected:

*I also realized how invisible the need for help is in Japan. This event was the first time I had seen so many homeless people, and I was shocked by the number. Homeless people in Europe are more visible, often staying near churches and main streets where people can see them and offer help. I remembered seeing homeless people near churches and large roads when I visited Spain. In Japan, however, homeless people aren’t near shrines or temples, nor in crowded areas. Through interviews, I learned that they tend to stay under railway bridges or beneath overpasses. This difference may be because Japanese homeless people view their situation as shameful, wanting to avoid being seen in public. Just surviving day by day, they prefer secluded places to avoid exposing their unfortunate circumstances to others. The organizers mentioned the need to focus and look out for those in hidden places, as it becomes challenging to help if they remain unseen. They stressed the importance of holding events like this to reach those people. Japan’s homeless community is remarkably strong and tightly connected compared to other countries, and information spreads quickly within it. (MU 9.05)*

While aiming to investigate Christian culture, a window of understanding was opened up on the plight of the homeless in his own society. He could relate the differences between the visible homeless in other countries and the invisible homeless in Japan and speculated about the reasons.

At the intracultural level, the reports contained multiple instances of students interpreting and relating practices between churches. One student wrote that the church he attended “differs from traditional churches, such as those in Europe, in its relatively secular atmosphere” (MU 1.03). Similarly, another student wrote, “Typically, a church has a cross in the center, and participants dress formally, often with candles and other decorations. However, at this church, attendees dressed in comfortable clothing, and the atmosphere was far from formal” (MU 10.04). Several students also mentioned the differences between Catholic and Protestant church meetings. These observations suggest that students were often discouraged from essentializing Christian culture. They noticed divergent practices within the global church, and that there was no uniform Christian way of doing things—variation exists within communities.

### **Discovery and Interaction**

Students’ skills of discovery and interaction were employed during the fieldwork as the task requirements necessitated speaking with church members and participating in the shared practices of the meeting. Generally, students reported following the task instructions faithfully, which included deciding a focus before the fieldwork, preparing questions, writing notes, taking photographs, and recording audio. Before attending the church, students said they engaged in secondary research by gathering information online. They found details of the location of the church, its history, and its purpose, which provided some context for the fieldwork and helped to focus their inquiry.

Students asked questions inspired by their pre-field research and on-site observations. One student noted, “As I proceeded, I saw young men and women in casual attire rehearsing songs, with a large computer at the back of the room for streaming the service” (MU 3.03). One of the people rehearsing approached, and “seeing that everyone was dressed casually, I inquired if there was no dress code” (MU 3.05). This kind of unabashed questioning was a major theme in the data. Such questions included, “When did you first learn about Christianity? What did you first learn about Christianity? What is your favorite story in the Bible? Why did you become a Christian?” (MU 12.02). One informant said that she would like to marry a Christian, which prompted a question from the student: “I asked her why she prefers Christians” (MU 5.04). Students reported being ready and eager to ask questions about church culture, which stemmed from their observations of anything they considered interesting or surprising.

Students related stories, often deeply personal, that they had heard from church members. One informant confided that “she was a really sensitive girl and every time someone said some bad or rude things to her, she got really sad and thought that nobody loved her” (MU 4.08), but coming to church helped her realize her worth. Another informant shared that “she sometimes has a hard time building relationships” (MU 5.04). One lady spoke about her money problems and her cheating spouse, and that “she became so depressed that she could not properly take care of her children” (MU 6.08). To be able to listen to and understand these very personal stories requires an appropriate level of skills of discovery and interaction, as does recounting these stories in their written reports.

### **Critical Cultural Awareness**

Engaging with a living community of faith provided students with a first-hand experience of church through which they could critically evaluate the concepts and practices of Christianity. A major theme here was healthy skepticism. Students had learnt in class that Christians believed in a good, loving, and powerful God. However, one student then questioned, “Where is God in the midst of my suffering?

... Why God give us this deep sadness? I am not Christian, but sometimes when I have a problem or something sad happen to me, I think why God do not nothing to help me” (MU 2.09). Similarly, another student questioned, “We often wish to God to help us with anything expecting that he helps us in any way. However, when he does not give us what we wished, we start to wonder if there is really God in this world” (MU 4.05). These two students came to the fieldwork with these doubts in mind, and both gained insight into how Christians think about the answers to these questions. In both cases, the students realized that their own conception of God was different to the conceptions of God found in cultural Christianity.

Another theme concerned the provision of evidence in support of a claim. Many of the reports stated clear reasons and gave justifications for their evaluations of the culture. One student noted, “There are no scientific prove or evidence that explains the existence of God or how he has a big effect on people’s lives”, and then goes on to say, “but the energy in those Christians are definitely a living prove that God is always right here with us, in our hard and happy times” (MU 4.10). It is certainly questionable whether community exuberance is able to prove the existence of God, and perhaps this student is overstating his case. Nevertheless, he notes that, “It was fascinating how many people could change the way they think or the way they live by believing in God. God’s words are giving them the confidence and power to their daily life” (MU 4.10). The student is applying two sets of criteria to belief in God: that of science and that of experience. The scientific criteria were freely accessible in the classroom and elsewhere, and the first-hand experience was gained through participation.

A student who visited the Park church demonstrated sharp critical cultural awareness in this excerpt:

*Through this fieldwork, I realized that it’s okay if people don’t believe in Christianity. From my observations, about 90% of the attendees were there primarily to receive food. Only around five people seemed to be genuinely singing and praying. If I were one of the organizers, I might feel frustrated, wondering why so few people appreciated the effort. However, the staff, fully aware of this, continued their work with dedication and kindness. This is because their goal isn’t to increase the number of Christian believers but to extend a helping hand to those in difficult circumstances. I felt that this mission reflects the belief that we are all created in the image of God. (MU 9.04)*

He had learned in class that people attend church to worship God and engage in other religious activities, but his observations of the Park church led him to conclude that most of the homeless people came to receive free food. While many may immediately condemn such self-interested behavior from people who don’t believe in Christianity, he says, “it’s okay”. He enters into the world of the organizers, adopting their perspectives as his own, and wonders why they didn’t appear frustrated. This leads him to realize that their goal wasn’t to convert people to their religion, but to offer help. He then tests this conclusion by relating it back to what he had learned in class, namely, that Christian culture affirms that humans are created in God’s image.

Critical reflexivity towards their own culture was another theme that arose from the data. The most common instance of this concerned Japanese people’s disinterest in religion. One commented, “Japanese people are not interested in religion, and even when they do hold religious events such as weddings and New Year’s visits to shrines, they often do so only as a formality, not out of religious piety” (MU 5.02). One report gave a reason for this prejudice against religion: “In Japan, there are many people who do not understand not only Christianity but also religion itself, and many people have prejudice against it due to a lack of familiarity with it” (MU 5.05). This student believed that any bias against religion mainly stems from lack of knowledge, rather than any innate quality of religion itself. Indeed, several comments noted the positive role that religion can play in building a support network for its members, such as: “I also felt that there is a spirit of mutual help... Many people in

Japan are not interested in religion, but I hope that there will be more opportunities to cherish this kind of connection with others” (MU 5.09). The result of positively evaluating aspects of another culture led to a hope for their own culture transformation.

## Discussion

This paper set out to address the research question: In what ways can an ethnographic task in a minority religious community help shape intercultural communicative competence? It did this by applying Byram’s model of ICC as a lens through which to examine students’ experiences as revealed in their written reports. Findings suggest that the ethnographic task helped shape students’ ICC by encouraging a favorable attitude (*savoir être*) towards the minority culture. Previous research has shown how ethnography may promote positive attitudes when the culture being investigated is one defined by language speakers (Bateman, 2002; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996), and findings of the present study suggest that this may also hold true when the culture is one defined by religious affiliation. Negative impressions of church culture in students’ reports were notable by their absence. Students were aware that the church fieldwork was facilitated through their teacher’s personal connections, so it’s possible they were discouraged from mentioning anything censorious. Nevertheless, positive impressions of the community being welcoming, kind, friendly, and enjoyable were recurrent.

Being immersed in the church environment and participating in its shared practices also seems to have shaped students’ knowledge (*savoir*) in a way that enhanced classroom learning. Important aspects of the religious culture were observed and noted, such as music style, interior design of the meeting space, social interactions, and worship rituals. However, new knowledge was not limited to these observable phenomena. Rather, what was *visible* often opened a door to a deeper understanding of what was *invisible*; namely, the theoretical and theological concepts they had encountered in class. As one student wrote, “(Before I attended church) we had learned about God, Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. However, I could not image how Christian think about the God and why they believe in the God” (MU 2.01). She goes on to explain that after conducting her ethnography, it all made a lot more sense. Participant observation allowed this student to make conceptual advances from the abstract to the concrete that amplified classroom learning.

Additionally, students’ reports suggested that immersion and participation in community practice provided a shared, palpable experience that facilitated empathy towards community members. The essence of empathy can be described as “feeling one’s way into” and it may be the most important sentiment for ICC (Calloway-Thomas et al., 2017), because the ability to identify with the other at a cognitive and emotional level lays a groundwork for effective and appropriate communication (Arasaratnam et al., 2010). Being in a church gathering and “feeling” the community atmosphere, and listening to personal stories and “feeling” what motivated others to come to church, were mentioned as catalysts for understanding the beliefs and practices of the culture. The act of entering bodily into a community may open up affective doors for “feeling one’s way into” the culture in a way that is difficult with other modes of interaction, such as that of online ethnography.

There is no consensus within the literature as to which is preeminent for ICC: knowledge or attitudes. Some have argued that knowledge acquisition should be the primary goal of interreligious and intercultural education (e.g., Lindsay, 2020), while others have argued that attitudes are pivotal and should come first, because attitudes influence the interpretation of new information (e.g., Morgan & Sandage, 2016). The present study reveals instances of both. Knowledge of Christian culture gained in the classroom sparked in some students a curiosity and a willingness to engage with the community, while students who demonstrated an empathic disposition achieved insights into the reasons and motivations for observed cultural practices.

Perhaps the main problem encountered with this ethnographic task concerned the issue of generalization. Students who engage in ethnography may end up making new generalizations or holding on to preexisting ones. For instance, after training students in ICC, Dasli and Sangster (2023) found that students' cultural generalizations remained almost intact after their ethnographic work. The problem encountered in the present study, however, did not concern generalizations about Christian culture, but about students' own culture. As the fieldwork was conducted in multicultural churches, with interdenominational congregations, students observed the rich and varied ideas and practices that mark global Christianity. Students frequently expressed surprise at aspects of their church that didn't fit their preconceptions, most notably modern music, casual fashion, and relaxed atmosphere. These surprising aspects revealed the diversity and variation within Christianity and allowed students to see church culture as fluid and contested, thus curtailing any movement towards generalization.

However, perhaps in an effort to differentiate themselves from the eclectic nature of the church community, some students constructed an essentialized notion of being Japanese in their reports. There were numerous comments in which being "Japanese" was portrayed in contradistinction to being "Christian"; the two were considered mutually exclusive. While categorization occurs naturally in discourse surrounding culture, critical metapragmatic awareness is needed to prevent typifications from hardening into stereotypifications (Pizziconi, 2021). This metapragmatic awareness was not evident in students' reports. While students may have observed Christian culture to be fluid, diverse and constantly evolving, students often implied that their own Japanese culture was monolithic and fixed. This tendency toward self-essentialization would impair any skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) as, in order to interpret beliefs and practices from another culture, it's necessary to understand one's own. While non-essentialist notions of culture should not be held up as an ideal or a moral imperative (Wang & McConachy, forthcoming), students who are drifting into self-essentialization would benefit from being challenged to critically evaluate those beliefs.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Time spent in the community was limited to one church service, which affects the interpretation of the findings. The generally positive impressions can be attributed in part to a honeymoon effect, where everything seemed new and exciting. No doubt, if students had embedded themselves for longer in the community, they would have observed some unhealthy community dynamics, which are present in every cultural group. Likewise, the interactional patterns that were recorded mainly focused on the formalities of the worship service, rather than the much more subtle personal interactions between individual members.

Another limitation is that this study focused on how students learned culture, and so language learning was not directly addressed. The *Christianity and Culture* course was a hard CLIL course in which content learning (Christian culture) was emphasized above language learning. Future pedagogical research into student-conducted ethnography would do well by focusing more on the dynamic integration of content and language, which is a pressing concern for the field of CLIL (Nikula et al., 2016). Such a pedagogy would entail providing explicit classroom instruction in particular aspects of language that are necessary for socialization into the minority culture. In this regard, one promising avenue of enquiry is cognitive discourse functions (Dalton-Puffer, 2013), or CDFs. Students could receive explicit classroom support in the form of training in CDFs in the field of religion. The relationship between students' development of ICC and language could then be tracked longitudinally as they engage with a minority group over multiple visits. Such groups could include communities of different religious faiths, and even subcultures not united by religious belief but by a common interest, such as music, anime, sport, fashion, or political affiliation, to name a few.

## Conclusion

This study has shown how an ethnographic task conducted within a local, minority religious community can help shape intercultural communicative competence. Hoff (2020) argued that when it comes to ICC, the primary aim of the teacher should be to create opportunities for deep learning that impact students at a profound, personal level; and that this aim supersedes aims related to assessing or measuring a student's level of ICC. The ethnographic task created such an opportunity by requiring that students enter a situation where their skills of discovery and interaction could be deployed in the service of developing their sociocultural knowledge, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical concepts encountered in the classroom and the lived realities of the target community.

There are a number of pedagogical implications of this study for higher education. Firstly, having students engage in ethnography in a minority religious community is a viable option for educators seeking to provide conditions favorable to intercultural learning, particularly when students do not have access to study abroad opportunities. The ethnographic task engaged learners in all five domains of ICC, and while this study did not measure how ICC increased in learners, the data reveal that each area of competence was activated in order to complete the task. Educators can decide how best to boost development in each area by considering local contextual factors. Secondly, classroom learning and preparation are important. Students consistently drew upon theoretical concepts and cultural knowledge learned during the course to make sense of what they observed in church. In some cases, their observations gave substance to their cognitive understandings, while in other cases, their observations overthrew faulty presuppositions. Either way, it is recommended that importance be given to classroom work before students engage in ethnography. Thirdly, when undertaking this kind of task in a highly homogeneous home culture like Japan, students should be made aware of the complexity of cultural categories and encouraged to critically evaluate essentialized notions of their own culture. Without such teaching, the students in this study slipped into a discourse that created a line of exclusion between “us” and “them”, and even though they exhibited a favorable attitude toward the minority religious community, they still considered the group to be “not Japanese”.

With heightened religious hostilities worldwide, scholars and political institutions have called for increased interreligious education. This study has demonstrated the potential of ethnographic research to supply fertile conditions under which the learning of ICC in relation to religious minorities can occur. Ultimately, this research provides an insight into the various benefits which students may gain through undertaking ethnographic research; benefits which may help students think, feel, and act with empathy and understanding towards local minority groups.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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