# The Impact of Physical Intercultural Interaction on University Students' Motivation for Further Language Learning: An Exploratory Study

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of physical intercultural interaction on university students' motivation for further language learning. The study follows 65 participants who were involved in an international student exchange programme. All of the participants have taken English and Mandarin proficiency courses in their respective institutions prior to the programme. Afterwards, they were converged in a physical, 10-day intercultural programme in which they had to engage in various activities and implement their language skills into actual practice. A questionnaire was administered pre and post-programme to investigate its impact on the participants' motivation for further language learning. Overall, the findings from the pre/post-programme suggest that being involved in the exchange programme influenced the participants to have an increased motivation to continue their learning in the target languages.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communication, Motivation, Language Learning.

## INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning in recent years are increasingly engaging in internationalisation activities. From student exchange programmes to outbound and mobility exercises, this trend has become essential to prepare university students in facing a highly globalised and multilingual job markets. de Wit and Altbach (2021) explained this as one of the defining trends of contemporary higher education policy, noting that internationalisation has shifted from a peripheral, elite activity to a core institutional strategy for economic, academic, and sociocultural purposes. The general assumption from this practice is that such programmes provide students with direct, physical contact with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is beneficial as it builds cultural awareness as well as strengthen students' motivation to continue learning and using additional languages in their lives. Additionally, Sofyan et al. (2026) found that global-intercultural competence and social capital were significant predictors of students' motivation to participate in exchange programmes in the first place. This may suggest to a connection between students' intercultural interaction and their motivation to seek further learning opportunities. Thus, given the right incentive, some

of these students might even strive to pursue further language learning out of their own volition once they realise the potential of their own learning upon participating in such intercultural programmes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study examined how direct intercultural interaction or communication may influence university students' motivation for further language learning. It is mainly grounded on Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), which conceptualises motivation through three components: the ideal L2 self (the person one would like to become as a language user), the ought-to L2 self (obligations perceived from others), and the L2 learning experience (situated, environment-driven motivation). Furthermore, it also explored how intercultural contact and exchange programmes affect language-learning motivation of university students. These concepts culminate into a framework that has proven adaptable to multilingual and intercultural contexts, as researchers have extended the "ideal self" construct into an ideal multilingual self; capable of capturing learners' images of themselves as multilingual, interculturally competent communicators rather than just users of a single target language. An example of this would be Göksu and Louis (2025) who found that Belgian university students studying French and other languages modelled their language learning journey through a combination of intrinsic cultural interest, extrinsic academic and career goals, integrative motives, and prior language-learning experience. This in turn produced a diverse and dynamic motivational profile that a traditional, single-language classroom would find difficult to achieve. In addition, Yashima's (2002) notion of international stance and willingness to communicate highlights learners' interest in international affairs, other cultures, and communication with people from different backgrounds as a distinct but related motivator for L2 engagement. Together, these previous studies provide the conceptual support for the multidimensional view of motivation which include interest and enjoyment, future self-images, intercultural communication drives, perceived value, and behavioural intentions. They also investigated how motivation is affected by involvement in the kind of exchange programmes previously mentioned.

On a more direct note, some studies found that participation in intercultural communication appears to enhance university students' language learning motivation. This is particularly so when the participants themselves felt enriched by the perceived relevance and enjoyment of learning. Consequently, they would feel their global perspectives expanding and hence reinforce positive self-beliefs about L2 use. Therefore, they would demonstrate higher willingness to communicate, greater engagement in language tasks, and more durable motivation to persist in L2 learning. This can be seen through Liu and Ji's (2023) study where intercultural activities using augmented reality (AR) increased both intercultural competence and L2 learning motivation among Chinese EFL learners. Moreover, Lee et al. (2023) found that online intercultural curricula embedded in EFL courses elevated students' motivation and English proficiency in Thai secondary learners. In face-to-face intercultural communication, some evidence seems to show a more significant increase in learning among participants. For instance, Karimullah et al. (2021) reported a sharp increase in learners' engagement when guest lecturers come from different cultures. Hessel (2019) also noted something similar when studying German Erasmus scholars studying in the United Kingdom. Their experience engaging interculturally with local students had meaningfully shaped their second-language motivation, apart from enhancing their L2 development. Furthermore, Neff and Apple (2023) compared Japanese learners of English undertaking one-month and one-year international exchange programmes and found that both groups experienced significant gains in L2 speaking confidence and a strengthened ideal L2 self, alongside a weakened ought-to L2 self. This suggests that even relatively brief periods of immersive intercultural contact can produce measurable motivational and attitudinal shifts, though the specific pattern of change may differ from that produced by longer stays. More encouraging evidence supporting a positive association between intercultural participation and motivation for language learning among university students can also be seen in other studies (Yang et al., 2024; Kabir et al., 2022; Yang & Wu, 2025; Skidmore, 2026). Despite the positive associations between participation in intercultural interaction with enhanced motivation for language learning, there is also some evidence to suggest that the positive outcome may not be the same across different circumstances. In some cases, the learners' motivation could even be diminished. This is particularly evident when some participants have high language anxiety, resulting in

them refusing or failing to engage meaningfully with their international counterparts during the interaction. According to Yang and Wu (2025), some undergraduate students at a leading Chinese university reported high English-use anxiety. Their interview data showed that many of these students avoided being involved in intercultural conversations altogether, actively seeking Mandarin-speaking individuals to help them translate their communication instead. This avoidance pattern seems prevalent in lower proficiency students whose language use anxiety resulted in them having increased sensitivity.

They are afraid to make language errors, thinking it would lead to embarrassment and social rejection. Therefore, the interactions that are supposed to happen and shape their motivation were shut down before they even occurred (Lou & Noels, 2020). Even if the exposure to intercultural interaction is repeated to them as an effort to encourage engagement, participants with high language anxiety may instead reinforce avoidance rather than confidence (Sevinç & Backus, 2019; Yang & Wu, 2025). In short, participation in intercultural interaction does not automatically mean that individuals will be able to enhance their motivation for language learning. For some participants with specific conditions, proper support must be provided to mitigate factors such as anxiety and withdrawal to ensure their involvement in such programmes does not harm them.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explored the impact of physical intercultural interaction on university students' motivation for further language learning. The study followed 65 participants who were involved in an international student exchange programme. The programme required them to participate in a physical, 10-day intercultural programme in which they had to engage in various activities and implement their language skills into actual practice. In order to guide the direction of the research, the following research questions were thus posed:

RQ1: Does participation in physical, intercultural interaction affect university students' motivation for language learning?

RQ2: To what extent does the university students' interaction in physical, intercultural communication change their motivation for further language learning?

### Research Design and Instrument

This study adopted the quantitative design. To investigate the possible changes in the university students' motivation for further language learning after participating in the exchange programme, a questionnaire was developed by the researchers through adapting the content from an existing, in-house questionnaire items previously developed and used by holders of the researchers' internationalisation office. This was deemed necessary as the existing questionnaire is already grounded in Dörnyei's (2009) dimensions of L2MSS as previously mentioned in the literature. Hence, the theoretical foundation for the questionnaire items is already justified. Additionally, for content validity evaluation, the adapted questionnaire was then submitted to an expert panel of 7 individuals who are professionals in English or Mandarin language teaching at the tertiary education level, with a minimum of 10 years of experience in their respective fields. The panel members were not involved in any way in the exchange programme other than assisting to evaluate the questionnaire items. This removes any issue on bias or prejudice. Next, the scale in Table 1 provided a clear guide on how the panel members grounded their evaluation process.

**Table 1 Expert panel evaluation on questionnaire items.**

| Rating | Description |
|---|---|
| 1 | Item is not relevant |
| 2 | Item is somewhat relevant |

| | |
|---|---|
| 3 | Item is quite relevant |
| 4 | Item is highly relevant |

Once the content validity evaluation was conducted, the researchers intended to conduct a construct validity of the questionnaire as well. However, due to the nature of the exchange programme, the time constraints surrounding it, and the institutional red tapes that required further, lengthy approvals; the construct validity evaluation was unable to be completed. This shall be addressed in the 'Limitations and Directions for Future Research' section of the current paper.

Subsequently, the questionnaire was piloted in a similar, but locally rooted activity prior to the international exchange programme. As the results for the pilot study yielded reliable outcomes, the researchers continued with its use. The questionnaire was administered at the pre/post stages of the programme. It consisted of 30 items that measured participants based on the motivation dimension as specified in Table 2. Participants responded to the items based on the following scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

**Table 2 Questionnaire for the present study.**

| **Motivation Dimension** | |
|---|---|
| **A) Interest and Enjoyment in Language Learning** | |
| 1 | I am interested in learning languages other than my first language. |
| 2 | I enjoy opportunities to learn and use other languages. |
| 3 | Learning another language is an enjoyable experience for me. |
| 4 | I am curious about learning new words and expressions in other languages. |
| 5 | I find learning about different languages interesting and stimulating. |
| 6 | I enjoy challenging myself to communicate in a language that I am still learning. |
| **B) Ideal Multilingual Self** | |
| 7 | I can imagine myself speaking more than one language confidently in the future. |
| 8 | I would like to become a person who can communicate in several languages. |
| 9 | Being able to speak different languages is part of the person I would like to become. |
| 10 | I can imagine myself using other languages when communicating with people from different countries. |
| 11 | I can see myself becoming a competent user of more than one language. |
| 12 | In the future, I would like others to see me as someone who can communicate in several languages. |
| **C) Intercultural Communication Motivation** | |
| 13 | I am motivated to learn languages so that I can communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 14 | I would like to use other languages to make friends with people from different countries. |
| 15 | Learning other languages can help me understand people from different cultures better. |
| 16 | I want to improve my language skills so that I can participate more confidently in intercultural interactions. |
| 17 | I would like to communicate directly with people from other cultures rather than depend on translation. |
| 18 | I am interested in learning languages because they can help me build relationships with people from different cultures. |
| **D) Perceived Value of Further Language Learning** | |
| 19 | Learning additional languages will be useful for my future. |
| 20 | Knowing several languages can provide me with more academic opportunities. |
| 21 | Knowing several languages can improve my future career opportunities. |
| 22 | Learning other languages is worth the time and effort required. |
| 23 | Being able to communicate in several languages is a valuable skill in today's world. |
| 24 | Learning additional languages can broaden my personal and professional opportunities. |
| **E) Intention and Effort for Further Language Learning** | |
| 25 | I intend to continue learning another language in the future. |
| 26 | I am willing to spend more time improving my ability in other languages. |
| 27 | I would take part in additional language-learning activities if I had the opportunity. |
| 28 | I plan to actively look for opportunities to practise other languages. |
| 29 | I am willing to practise another language regularly, even outside formal classes. |
| 30 | I intend to make language learning part of my future personal development. |

**Participants**

The participants involved in the study were 65 university students who voluntarily joined the international exchange programme. Due to concerns on consent about sensitive personal information, the researchers would not disclose detailed information about the participants. They could however provide general information about the participants as a group; their ages range from 19-23 years old, inclusive of male and female students, and they have all taken proficiency language courses in both English and Mandarin in their respective institutions. However, this should not be an issue as the main objective of this study is simply to investigate the changes in their motivation for further language learning after participating in the exchange programme. Thus, details such as their varying proficiency levels in both English and Mandarin were not considered to be an extraneous factor particularly to the outcomes of the study. In addition, to mitigate factors like anxiety or withdrawal as mentioned in the literature, the participants could opt out of any activity

that they do not wish to join in. Should they require any additional support during the programme, facilitators were also available round the clock to assist in any way deemed necessary.

**The Exchange Programme**

The international student exchange programme mentioned in the study is part of an effort by both institutions to internationalise their operations which is becoming the new norm in the current globalised world. The programme involved participants in a series of physical activities that would require them to actively communicate with each other to accomplish certain tasks. Some of the tasks include group discussions on how their cultures are similar or differ from one another, showcasing their traditional food via presentations, learning how to cook traditional Malaysian food, studying and performing traditional Malay cultural dances, visiting local landmarks, and even a competitive quiz to recapitulate their learning journey throughout the programme.



**Figure 1 Participants involved in a group discussion.**



**Figure 2 Participants performing cultural dances during Cultural Night.**



**Figure 3 Closing ceremony of the exchange programme.**

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Preliminary Analysis

The study examined changes in university students' motivation for further language learning after participating in an international student exchange programme that involved physical and intercultural interactions. A total of 65 students participated and recorded their responses via a questionnaire at the pre-test and post-test stages. Firstly, the content validity of the 30-item questionnaire was evaluated by a panel of seven experts. The instrument comprised five theoretically proposed dimensions as proposed by Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS, with six items representing each dimension. The experts evaluated the relevance of each item using a four-point rating scale ranging from 1 (Item is not relevant) to 4 (Item is highly relevant). Content validity was assessed using the Item-Level Content Validity Index (I-CVI), Scale-Level Content Validity Index based on averaging (S-CVI/Ave), Scale-Level Content Validity Index based on universal agreement (S-CVI/UA), and modified kappa statistics to account for chance agreement. Ratings of 3 or 4 were considered indicative of item relevance.

The findings demonstrated strong overall content relevance, with an S-CVI/Ave of .957 and an S-CVI/UA of .767. Of the 30 items, 23 (76.7%) achieved unanimous expert agreement (I-CVI = 1.00), while five items achieved an I-CVI of .857. Two items, Q4 and Q12, obtained I-CVI values of .714, falling slightly below the commonly recommended threshold of .78 for panels comprising six or more experts. At the dimensional level, the S-CVI/Ave values were .929 for Interest and Enjoyment in Language Learning, .929 for Ideal Multilingual Self, 1.000 for Intercultural Communication Motivation, .952 for Perceived Value of Further Language Learning, and .976 for Intention and Effort for Further Language Learning. All five dimensions exceeded the recommended S-CVI/Ave criterion of .90. Modified kappa coefficients ranged from .658 to 1.000, indicating good to excellent chance-corrected agreement across the questionnaire items. Although Q4 and Q12 demonstrated good modified kappa values, their I-CVI results indicated a need for further content review. Nevertheless, the findings still provided strong preliminary evidence of content relevance for the questionnaire.

A construct validity evaluation was not conducted for the instrument. This is addressed in the 'Limitations and Directions for Future Research' section of the paper. However, to supplement that limitation, an internal consistency analysis was conducted and found that the overall questionnaire established good reliability at the pre-test (Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .862) and excellent reliability at post-test (Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .912) stages. This

suggests that the questionnaire items collectively provided a reliable measure of participants' motivation for further language learning.

Secondly, a distribution assessment of the overall pre–post difference scores using the Shapiro–Wilk test indicated a significant departure from normality ($p < .001$). Thus, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was chosen as the primary inferential method to evaluate differences at both the pre and post stages. Paired-samples t-tests were then conducted as well to provide a supplementary analysis, with both methods producing substantively consistent conclusions.

**Overall Changes in Language Learning Motivation**

The data elicited from the study is shown in Table 3. Overall, participants demonstrated an increase in motivation for further language learning after the programme concluded. The overall mean increased from 3.03 at pre-test to 3.50 at post-test, representing a rise of approximately 0.47 points. In addition, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that the increase was statistically significant, $W = 0.00$, $p < .001$. Next, the supplementary paired-samples t-test produced a consistent result, with $t(64) = 11.20$, $p < .001$. The standardised mean change was large (Cohen's $dz = 1.39$), indicating that the observed difference was not only statistically significant but also substantial in magnitude.

**Table 3 Pre-Test and Post-Test Motivation Scores by Motivation Dimension.**

| Motivation Dimension | Pre-test M (SD) | Post-test M (SD) | Mean Change | Wilcoxon p | Cohen's dz |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a) Interest and Enjoyment | 3.06 (0.44) | 3.32 (0.63) | +0.25 | < .001 | 0.61 |
| b) Ideal Multilingual Self | 3.08 (0.44) | 3.41 (0.44) | +0.33 | < .001 | 0.76 |
| c) Intercultural Communication Motivation | 2.97 (0.30) | 3.61 (0.50) | +0.64 | < .001 | 1.31 |
| d) Perceived Value | 3.15 (0.53) | 3.70 (0.53) | +0.55 | < .001 | 1.15 |
| e) Intention and Effort | 2.88 (0.37) | 3.46 (0.47) | +0.58 | < .001 | 1.20 |
| Overall Motivation | 3.03 | 3.50 | +0.47 | < .001 | 1.39 |

In the dimension 'Interest and Enjoyment', participants' scores increased from $M = 3.06$ ($SD = 0.44$) at pre-test to $M = 3.32$ ($SD = 0.63$) at post-test. The mean increase was 0.25 points and was statistically significant ($p < .001$). The standardised change was moderate to large ($dz = 0.61$). Despite showing the least increase amongst the five dimensions, the findings still indicate that participants reported greater interest and enjoyment of language learning following the intercultural experience.

Meanwhile, 'Ideal Multilingual Self' increased from $M = 3.08$ ($SD = 0.44$) to $M = 3.41$ ($SD = 0.44$), representing a mean increase of 0.33 points. The difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$), with a moderate to large standardised effect ($dz = 0.76$). This suggests that following their involvement in the programme, participants were more likely to envision themselves as individuals capable of using multiple languages. This finding is particularly relevant to motivational perspectives emphasising learners' future self-images.

The largest mean increase was observed for 'Intercultural Communication Motivation'. Scores increased from $M = 2.97$ ($SD = 0.30$) at pre-test to $M = 3.61$ ($SD = 0.50$) at post-test, corresponding to an increase of 0.64 points. The difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$) and was accompanied by a large standardised effect ($dz = 1.31$). Among the five dimensions, these results represent the strongest evidence of change following the intercultural programme. At the item level, several of the largest improvements were

also located within communication-oriented items. For example, participants reported "stronger motivation to build relationships with people from different cultures (+0.74)", "improve their language skills for confident intercultural interaction (+0.66)", "communicate directly rather than depend on translation (+0.65)", and "use languages to make friends with people from different countries (+0.63)". This item-level trend reinforces the dimension-level results and suggest that direct intercultural experience may be significantly relevant to students' perceived need and desire to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Next, participants' perceptions of the value of further language learning also increased substantially. Mean scores increased from M = 3.15 (SD = 0.53) at pre-test to M = 3.70 (SD = 0.53) at post-test. The mean difference of 0.55 points was statistically significant ($p < .001$), with a large standardised effect ($dz = 1.15$). The findings suggest that following the programme, participants are more likely to place greater value in acquiring additional language abilities. The experience may consequently have strengthened students' perceptions of multilingual competence as a useful resource for their future academic, professional, social, or personal lives.

Finally, a substantial increase was also observed for 'Intention and Effort'. Scores increased from M = 2.88 (SD = 0.37) at pre-test to M = 3.46 (SD = 0.47) at post-test. The mean increase of 0.58 points was statistically significant ($p < .001$), with a large standardised effect ($dz = 1.20$). Notably, one of the largest item-level changes in the study involved participants "actively looking for opportunities to practise languages (+0.65)". This finding is important because it suggests that the post-programme change extended beyond positive perceptions alone. It may also lean toward stronger self-reported behavioural intentions by the participants to continue practising and learning languages on their own.

## CONCLUSION

The present study provides some evidence of a significant increase in university students' motivation for further language learning following participation in a physical, intercultural interaction programme. Participants' overall motivation showed a significant increase from the pre-test to post-test stage, with a large standardised change. Substantial improvements were also observed across all five motivational dimensions. The most pronounced improvement occurred in 'Intercultural Communication Motivation', followed by 'Intention and Effort' and 'Perceived Value'. These findings suggest that having university students participate in physical, intercultural interaction may build their intrinsic interest to learn and use languages meaningfully as attributes that could bridge international communication and relationship building, particularly in multilingual environments.

### Implications for Stakeholders

The findings demonstrate several implications for language education and internationalisation efforts in higher education. Firstly, an authentic, intercultural interaction appears to have potential as a motivational factor to encourage students to learn a language as opposed to normal classroom instruction alone. Institutions may therefore consider creating structured opportunities in which local and international students interact through multilingual and intercultural activities.

Secondly, student exchange programmes should encourage interaction that requires meaningful communication rather than merely placing students from different backgrounds in the same physical environment. This could be achieved through thematic collaborative tasks, peer exchanges, cultural projects, multilingual workshops, and problem-solving activities. As shown in the present study, these activities may create stronger conditions for learners to experience the communicative value of the languages they learnt in class.

Finally, language educators may plan and structure their classroom instruction surrounding how intercultural experiences could connect students to their ideal or future multilingual needs. Once this is achieved, some reflection activities could follow to assist students in considering which languages they would like to

develop or what type of multilingual communicator they would like to become. This could be a significant early step for them in deciding how their multilingual competence might influence their future academic and professional lives.

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are some limitations to this study that should be factored in when discussing the results. The first limitation is that the study only adopted a single group, pre/post-test design. Although the data elicited in the findings may demonstrate a positive change in the participants motivation for language learning following the programme, it does not necessarily mean that the programme itself exclusively attributed to the observed changes. Thus, the data of this study only presents the pre/post-test associations rather than suggesting that the exchange programme itself is the sole factor of improvement when measuring the participants' responses. Moreover, external factors should be considered for further investigation as well, such as participants' backgrounds, levels of study or even their proficiency in the target languages used in the exchange programme. Furthermore, future studies should also consider adopting the experimental or quasi-experimental designs involving comparison or control groups. For example, students participating in structured physical intercultural interaction could be compared with students undertaking conventional language-learning activities or online intercultural interaction. This could show a more direct and relevant comparisons between the two approaches to language learning.

Secondly, the instrument utilised in the current study did not complete a construct validity evaluation. Although expert agreement via content validation evaluation provided some evidence that the items adequately reflect the intended content domains, it does not necessarily establish whether participants interpret and respond to the items in ways consistent with the proposed theoretical structure. Thus, it is suggested that future research include construct validity evaluation as well to further solidify the validity of the study's findings.

The third limitation is the study relied primarily on the participants' self-reported motivation following the programme. Although valid, it does not automatically mean the motivation is followed through with concrete actions. Hence, future research could consider gathering additional data to exemplify the self-reported motivation through more tangible actions such as participants' subsequent enrolment in language courses, amounts of practice in the target languages, engagement with international students, or even demonstration of measurable improvements in proficiency of the target language used in the intercultural programme.

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