

# The Intervention Effects of Drama Therapy on Interpersonal Relationships among Chinese International Students in Japan: A Perspective Based on ABR (Arts-Based Research)

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to examine whether drama therapy intervention can be applied to support the interpersonal problems of international students in the future and to clarify the effects of drama therapy on the interpersonal problems of Chinese students in Japan during their intercultural life. Arts-Based Research (ABR) was employed as the research method. Two workshops incorporating drama therapy techniques were conducted, followed by individual interviews with six workshop collaborators. The obtained content was analyzed from an ABR perspective. The results showed that the experience of the drama therapy method was effective in releasing suppressed feelings, developing diverse perspectives on interpersonal problems, and giving the collaborators the courage to face their problems. This confirmed that the drama therapy method has a positive impact on the interpersonal problems of international students. It is expected that the drama therapy method will be utilized in the future as interpersonal assistance support, and it is suggested that it will help improve the quality of cross-cultural adjustment for international students.

**Keywords:** *Drama therapy, cross-cultural adaptation, cultural understanding, cross-cultural communication*

## 1. Introduction

With globalization's acceleration in recent years, Japan's international economic and cultural exchanges have become increasingly frequent. Many international students have come to Japan, with Chinese students accounting for a significant proportion of the total. To better achieve the academic goals of these students and to cultivate international talent, it is essential to enhance their intercultural adaptability. Numerous studies have shown that interpersonal relationships are crucial in international students adapting to Japanese society (Takai 1989; Oka et al. 1996). Additionally, existing research indicates that interpersonal relationship problems are among the top stressors for international students, significantly impacting their mental health and thus becoming a critical factor in intercultural adaptation (Ohashi 2008; Tang 2004). Therefore, supporting the interpersonal relationships of international students can alleviate their stress in intercultural adaptation, thereby improving their overall adaptability.

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Previous studies have shown that Japanese schools offer various support measures to enhance the intercultural adaptability of international students. These measures include intercultural exchange activities and personal counseling services, covering prevention and problem-solving. However, the actual utilization of these services is less than ideal. Research indicates that due to cultural habits and language barriers, international students resist counseling services (Xu and Matsuda 2016; Sonoda 2011). A survey conducted by Hokkaido University on the utilization of individual counseling services in 2017 found that the utilization rate among Asian international students was low, with the rate among Chinese international students being only 1.2% (Ishii 2019). Furthermore, the study by Sonoda and Makihara (2018) revealed that international students are generally dissatisfied with the opportunities for interaction on campus and have a strong need for more exchange opportunities both within and outside the campus.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on international students in Japan, exploring how to provide more acceptable and effective methods of interpersonal support.

Drama therapy allows individuals to play roles distanced from themselves in an imaginary world, thereby protecting self-expression while projecting unconscious emotions onto the drama, making these emotions conscious (Onoe 2021). Compared to traditional support methods primarily relying on verbal expression, drama therapy emphasizes bodily expression, which can help reduce students' concerns about verbal communication and facilitate more accessible self-expression. Furthermore, existing research suggests that a lack of interpersonal skills is a significant reason for the difficulties international students face in forming good relationships in a foreign culture, which in turn affects their adaptation (Tang 2004; Tanaka and Fujihara 1992). Drama therapy offers the advantage of providing opportunities for interaction with others through group activities and pre-rehearsal for social interactions through role-playing training, which has been shown to positively impact interpersonal relationships (Hirayama 2012; Omodaka and Shibayama 2008). Therefore, drama therapy not only enhances students' interpersonal skills but also provides opportunities for interaction with others through group activities, aiding in constructing interpersonal relationships.

In summary, considering the shortcomings of current support measures for international students and the characteristics and effects of drama therapy, it is expected that drama therapy could be an effective support method for addressing interpersonal relationship issues faced by international students in an intercultural context.

This study focuses specifically on Chinese international students. This decision is based on the fact that Chinese students constitute a significant proportion of the international student population. Additionally, as highlighted by Ge (2007), Chinese international students face more substantial challenges than students from other countries due to factors such as experiences of discrimination and communication issues, and by limiting the study to students from China, the influence of cultural background can be controlled.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to confirm the effectiveness of drama therapy as an intervention for interpersonal relationship issues among Chinese students in Japan and further discuss its potential application as a support method.

## 2. Methodology

Arts-Based Research (ABR) is a methodology for understanding and exploring research questions and issues through theater, storytelling, and other artistic activities involving researchers (Ito 2018). The first, perhaps largest, cluster of purposes for using ABR is investigating social issues such as intercultural communication and women's rights (Greenwood 2019). Compared to

traditional research methods that rely on statistics or language, ABR employs art as a medium of expression. This approach not only helps collaborators avoid discomfort with verbal expression or unconscious adherence to mainstream discourse but also through subjective experiences in the activity, including physical sensations and increased access to aspects of experience that are not communicated in narrative terms or language (Greenwood 2019; Ledger and Edwards 2011). It fosters communication between collaborators and researchers regarding their daily lives, concerns, challenges, or obstacles (Coemans and Hannes 2017). Consequently, this study adopts ABR as its research method, incorporating two research activities integrating drama therapy techniques and one follow-up semi-structured individual interview.

## (1) Collaborators<sup>1</sup>

The collaborators consisted of six physically and mentally healthy Chinese students studying in Japan, aged 20 and above. The characteristics of the collaborators are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Characteristics of the Collaborators**

Code name	Gender	Period of stay in Japan (up to the time of the interview)	Play experience	Interview time (format of the interview)
A	female	less than 5 years	No experience (However, have experienced the drama therapy method in the lecture received)	124 minutes (in person)
B	female	4 years	No experience	93 minutes (in person)
C	female	less than 4 years	Experienced (Japanese high school's drama club)	83 minutes (in person)
D	male	8 years	No experience (However, have experienced the drama therapy method in the lecture received)	111 minutes (in person)
E	male	7 years	No experience	76 minutes (online)
F	male	5 years	No experience	74 minutes (in person)

## (2) Ethics Approval

Before conducting the research activities for this study, ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Ritsumeikan University's Graduate School of Human Science (Approval Number: 2021-psy-052).

## (3) Research Procedures

The research activities in this study consisted of two drama therapy workshops and one follow-up individual interview.

<sup>1</sup> In Arts-Based Research, understanding and exploring research questions are achieved through collaborative artistic activities between researchers and participants. Hence, the "participants" are also considered "collaborators" in the study. Therefore, in this research, the term "collaborators" is used to refer to the "participants."

## 1) First Phase: Drama Therapy Activities

Over two consecutive weeks, the first author conducted two workshops employing drama therapy techniques. The first workshop lasted 131 minutes, and the second 142 minutes, including break times. To create a more relaxed atmosphere for the collaborators, the workshops were primarily conducted in their native language, Chinese. The entire process was recorded on video.

The two workshops were designed following the basic structure of drama therapy sessions, which include three elements: a warm-up to familiarize the collaborators with the acting and the environment and to prepare their mental and physical state, a central part of each session, and a cool-down to release the roles. These two workshops functioned as a cohesive unit. The first one was designed with more warm-up activities to prepare for the second one, which allowed for a deeper discussion on issues related to study abroad life and interpersonal relationships using techniques developed by Boal.

The primary technique used in the workshops was “Forum Theatre,” a method from “Theatre of the Oppressed” developed by Boal. This technique combines theater and dialogue to explore solutions to problems. In drama therapy, this technique involves performing and experimenting with “other choices” to gain the power to change difficult situations and symptoms (Boal 1984; Boal 2013; Onoe 2013). This study chose this technique to help international students “escape from their oppressed state” and gain the power to overcome interpersonal difficulties and change their circumstances. Additionally, the first author tested the Forum Theatre and Image Theatre techniques from the same theory in her seminar and confirmed that collaborators found it easier to understand the content and express themselves using Forum Theatre.

The two sessions in this study were designed with different objectives. In the first session, more time was spent on various warm-up games to help collaborators become familiar with each other and adapt to the performance state. Building on the first session, the second session applied the Forum Theatre techniques in the central part. It began with the enactment of “The Little Mermaid” story to prompt collaborators to reflect on their study abroad experiences. This was followed by re-enacting past interpersonal issues and discussing different solutions, which facilitated deeper discussions between collaborators and researchers about the interpersonal challenges encountered while studying abroad.

A more detailed flow of the two workshops is summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2. The Process of the Workshops**

	1st Workshop (2022.5.17)	2nd Workshop (2022.5.24)
Introduction:	The researcher introduced herself and briefly introduced her supervising instructor, who was present. She provided an overview of the study and explained the drama therapy techniques that the collaborators would experience. Additionally, she mentioned that although the activities were part of the research, the collaborators were encouraged to freely express themselves and create an enjoyable atmosphere, considering that many of them were meeting each other for the first time and experiencing drama therapy for the first time. Lastly, after confirming that the collaborators had no further questions about the content, she proceeded to the warm-up stage.	After the first workshop, during which the collaborators gained understanding of the activities and each other, a brief greeting was exchanged before commencing the second workshop.
Warm-up:	Warm-up game: Line-up game	Warm-up game: Line-up game,

Warm-up:	Finding commonalities in pairs; Introducing another person in their pairs; Expressing a specific location through a body movement game.	Emotion expression game: One of the collaborators was asked to express emotions like jealousy or frustration as the target one time. And then the others had to guess the emotions based on the expressions they observed.
Main Work:	“Rescuing Someone in an Awkward Situation” game: Collaborators were tasked with role-playing awkward situations from their daily lives. They were then prompted to devise diverse strategies to assist the person feeling awkward and act them out.  Preparatory practice for the second workshop: Utilizing the Forum Theatre technique, the researcher presented her interpersonal relationship issue as an example. Collaboratively, they brainstormed and enacted various solutions for addressing the issue.	Incorporating the technique of Forum Theatre, the collaborators enacted a rendition of the fairy tale “The Little Mermaid,” which resonated with a different cultural society, holding symbolic significance for their study abroad experiences. The fairy tale was segmented into various scenes, including a pivotal choice scene representing the transformative process of adaptation, such as deciding whether to consume a witch’s potion to become human. Collaborators were encouraged to infuse the performance with their personal reflections and emotions, connecting it to their study abroad journeys. Following this, the collaborators utilized the Forum Theatre method to act out and engage in discussions surrounding interpersonal relationship challenges encountered during their study abroad experiences.
Sharing and Reflection:	Each collaborator was asked to share their thoughts and reflections on the entire session, from the warm-up activities to the main work.	The collaborators were provided with the opportunity to share their reflections on the overall workshop and discuss issues pertaining to interpersonal relationships in their study abroad experiences.

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## 2) Second Phase: Individual Interviews

One week after the final workshop, the first author conducted individual interviews with each collaborator. The interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes, but based on the actual interviews, the shortest one lasted 74 minutes, and the longest lasted 124 minutes. The interview process with each collaborator is recorded through audio recordings. Like the workshop, the interviews were conducted in the collaborators’ native language, Chinese, to facilitate a more relaxed and open expression.

In ABR, the embodied experiences within artistic activities allow collaborators to reflect and self-edit during the performance process, in contrast to traditional immediate-response verbal interviews. Collaborators who lack the vocabulary or theoretical constructs to express complex feelings, reactions, or beliefs can use physical expression to bridge what they know or feel wordlessly inside them and thus produce an external expression that others can read. This can result in more truthful and complex answers than those that might be given instantly in an interview (Greenwood 2019).

The individual interviews in this phase served as an extension of the workshops, providing a more intimate space for communication and additional time for discussion. Building on the performances in the workshops, these interviews aimed to facilitate a deeper exploration of each collaborator’s intercultural interpersonal experiences. They also aimed to understand further their feelings and the experiences they gained through participation.

Considering the research objectives of this study, the first author, in consultation with her advisor, created a semi-structured interview guide. The guide was designed to address the specific aim of the study, which is to clarify the intervention effects of drama therapy and examine its potential and effectiveness as a support for international students. Table 3 shows the questionnaire items provided, which correspond to the objectives of this study.

**Table 3. Semi-structured Interview Guide**


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(1) Impressions of the Workshop:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are your impressions of participating in the workshop? Did you notice any changes in mood or find any content particularly memorable?</li> <li>2. How do you feel about the warm-up stage? Do you think warming up affected your expression during the workshop?</li> <li>3. Did the presence of my supervising instructor influence your expression? If so, how?</li> <li>4. How do you feel about participating in Chinese? Do you perceive any differences compared to expressing yourself in Japanese during the workshop?</li> <li>5. Reflecting on the “Little Mermaid” segment, which served as a metaphorical representation of the adaptation process in your study abroad experience, what insights have you gained?</li> <li>6. What are your thoughts on using fairy tales as a means of reflecting on your study abroad life through performance?</li> <li>7. How do you feel about discussing interpersonal issues using the Forum Theater technique?</li> <li>8. If you were to apply the Forum Theater approach to your past experiences, what ideas would you have? How do you feel about this possibility?</li> </ol>
(2) The Impact of Activity Participation on Interpersonal Relationships:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Did participating in the workshop lead to any changes for you? Did you experience any new realizations or shifts in mood as a result?</li> <li>2. Following the workshop, did you encounter any interpersonal relationship issues? Did your involvement in the activities influence your responses or perspectives in any way?</li> <li>3. For those with prior experience in drama therapy classes, do you believe it has had any influence on you? (Question for those with experience)</li> </ol>
(3) Past Experiences:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have you engaged in activities similar to this one that focus on interpersonal relationships among international students? If so, please share your experiences. When comparing your past experiences with this current activity, do you notice any differences?</li> <li>2. Beyond the content discussed in the workshop, have you encountered any challenges in interpersonal relationships during your cross-cultural experiences? Please elaborate.</li> <li>3. How did you address the issues you mentioned? Why did you chose to handle it/them that way?</li> <li>4. Reflecting on the choices you made at that time, how do you feel about them now?</li> </ol>
(4) Expected Support:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think about offering support to international students regarding their interpersonal relationships? What forms of support do you believe would be readily accepted and effective?</li> </ol>
(5) The Significance of Such Activities:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As an international student, what is your perspective on activities like this? Do you believe they hold any significance for you?</li> <li>2. How do you feel about using this format for future support initiatives?</li> </ol>
(6) Additional:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do you have any other questions or additional points you would like to discuss?</li> </ol>

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#### **(4) Data Analysis**

ABR is not only a research method but can also be used for all phases of the research process, including the formulation of the research question and the generation and analysis of data (Leavy 2019). In ABR, the performances and final artistic products created during the collaborative activities involving researchers and collaborators serve as research data. By examining and studying the symbolic meanings manifested in these activities and works, researchers can deeply explore their research questions (McNiff 2008). In this study, the research data included video recordings of the drama therapy workshops, verbatim transcripts of the recorded video and audio interviews, and reflective texts written by the researcher, who participated in and facilitated the activities. These records captured the changes and reflections of both the collaborators and the researcher.

To achieve the research objectives, the data were repeatedly reviewed, and symbolic meanings were extracted for further study and analysis.

For the interview data analysis, due to the large volume of data collected, the first author employed thematic analysis, a systematic approach for identifying patterns within qualitative data, to facilitate a more transparent organization of the content (Tsuchiya 2016).

For the analysis, verbatim transcripts were created based on the recorded interviews conducted in Chinese. After carefully reading and familiarizing themselves with the content, the researcher selected and coded information related to the collaborators' impressions of the workshop, the effects on interpersonal aspects, past experiences, expected support, and the significance of such activities based on the interview guide. The coding was performed based on the extracted data, generating the themes in Table 4. Anonymized excerpts<sup>2</sup> have also been provided in Table 4 to illustrate the findings. The relationships between these themes are illustrated in Figure 1.

**Table 4. Themes and subthemes following thematic analysis**

Themes and subthemes	Anonymous excerpts from the collected data (verbatim quotes)
Impressions of the Workshop	
Was easy to participate in:	<i>"In the past, I would have never actively engaged in such group activities. However, in this time, I found myself participating in everyone's play naturally." (Collaborator B)</i> <i>"Overall, I felt that I was able to participate smoothly in the experience." (Collaborator D)</i>
Was a good opportunity for interaction:	<i>"Since arriving in Japan, I have found it very challenging to communicate with Japanese people. However, these activities provided me with the opportunity to experience smooth communication with others for the first time in a long while." (Collaborator B)</i>
Thoughts about acting:	<i>"For example, I think that expressing oneself through methods such as projection or metaphor, like the Little Mermaid, enables one to express their thoughts more candidly." (Collaborator D)</i> <i>"(Through drama therapy,) I found it easier to grasp the core of the situation, or rather, I could reflect more on the things I relinquished and the sacrifices I made." (Collaborator D)</i>
The occurrence of change	<i>"(Through the workshop,) I have noticed changes in myself so far." (Collaborator B)</i>
Enjoyable:	<i>"This art therapy activity was quite vibrant and enjoyable" (Collaborator B)</i> <i>"In other words, (this activity) was quite fascinating. I found it quite relaxing." (Collaborator C)</i>
Effects on Interpersonal Aspects	
Received psychological support:	<i>"I am your research collaborator, but I felt like I was being helped. Previous wounds (from unpleasant interpersonal experiences) healed a bit." (Collaborator A)</i> <i>"Sometimes I feel unhappy about what I encounter... But when I interacted with others, I realized that someone else had similar experiences... Realizing that they share these experiences helped heal my feelings." (Collaborator D)</i>
Gained the courage to take a step forward:	<i>"(Through the workshop,) in terms of relationships, like making new friends, I feel a genuine boost in motivation from the bottom of my heart." (Collaborator A)</i> <i>"As I mentioned earlier, everyone faces various challenges, and since my problems are not unique, I feel a bit more motivated." (Collaborator E)</i>
Change in mindset:	<i>"After discussing it, I started feeling more inclined to tackle the issue... (Interpersonal problems in study abroad life, etc.) don't seem as daunting or difficult to resolve." (Collaborator B)</i>

<sup>2</sup> The selected excerpts from the Chinese verbatim transcripts were translated into English. However, during the translation process from Chinese to English, the researcher provided some supplementary information, which is indicated within parentheses.

Change in mindset:	<i>"I've come to realize that if I encounter something like this (an unpleasant interpersonal problem) in the future, I'd prefer to talk to my friends about it rather than keeping it to myself." (Collaborator C)</i>
<b>Past Experiences</b>	
Regarding interpersonal issues:	<p><i>"There is prejudice, of course. First, they label you, then they observe your behavior, and if you don't meet their expectations, they believe the initial label is justified." (Collaborator A)</i></p> <p><i>"Because I'm sensitive... for instance, I've felt excluded from a group because of the way they (other Japanese students) sit." (Collaborator B)</i></p> <p><i>"What I often observed is that individuals who come from diverse backgrounds and cultures struggle to find common ground." (Collaborator D)</i></p>
Influence of past interpersonal experiences:	<p><i>"Probably because I often feel stressed when communicating with Japanese people... I sense pressure, so I tend to become evasive." (Collaborator B)</i></p> <p><i>"To be honest, I think I've become increasingly withdrawn during my study abroad." (Collaborator D)</i></p> <p><i>"When discussing current events or cultural differences between two countries, I tend to refrain from interfering too much with others' ideas. I simply express my thoughts and provide explanations, but I no longer try to persuade them as I used to." (Collaborator F)</i></p>
Feedback on the utilization of school-provided support:	<p><i>"After consulting at school for six months, I feel very secure with the presence of TAs, health centers, etc., which I believe will be crucial support for me at some point." (Collaborator B)</i></p> <p><i>"Regarding school counselors, our teachers are kind individuals, so if you approach them, they will offer positive responses... Although it may alleviate the situation temporarily, I find myself feeling uneasy again when faced with the same problem (it addresses the emotional aspect but not the underlying issue)." (Collaborator C)</i></p> <p><i>"That activity (the friendship-building activity at school) is usually a one-time occurrence, so it concludes before any meaningful progress is made." (Collaborator D)</i></p>
Tendency towards handling issues independently:	<p><i>"(The researcher asked, 'Why didn't you seek support like from counselor when you were in so much pain?') Because I used to associate it with (a place) where people with mental illness went." (Collaborator A)</i></p> <p><i>"I often feel pressure myself, but I haven't categorized the type of pressure I feel." (Collaborator B)</i></p> <p><i>"(On using the counseling system) Even in Chinese, like this time, it took time to express what I wanted to talk about. If it were in Japanese, how could I do it (it would be even more difficult)... The other reason is because, as I mentioned before, it's my own issue, and talking about it might not help me." (Collaborator E)</i></p> <p><i>"From initially feeling deeply shocked (experiencing culture shock), I gradually work through and alleviate the condition on my own." (Collaborator F)</i></p>
Consultation with close acquaintances:	<p><i>"(About discussing interpersonal problems with a schoolteacher at the time) The teacher was also the teacher of the other international student involved, so they might not have been able to offer impartial advice in that role. If I told my parents, it might cause them to worry. If I confided in my best friend (in China), we would likely just vent about the situation together." (Collaborator A)</i></p> <p><i>"When I have a complaint, I talk to my Chinese classmates (in Japan). They understand my perspective and frustrations." (Collaborator C)</i></p>
<b>Expected Support</b>	
Opportunities for interaction:	<i>"By bringing international students together and organizing activities, you can broaden the opportunities for building relationships and potentially find some individuals who may become good friends." (Collaborator E)</i>
Equality in status:	<i>"I believe the most effective and challenging approach is to create a scenario where Chinese students outnumber Japanese students in a certain group... If this situation continues for a long time, it may slowly change, and the issue could gradually be resolved... In a situation where there are many Chinese students and few Japanese students, they might feel less excluded. Japanese students would not place themselves in the majority. Over time, they may begin to integrate with our group... Eventually, the situation would evolve, and both sides could achieve a more balanced mindset." (Collaborator B)</i>
Psychological support:	<i>(Researcher: "What kind of help do you think would be more effective and helpful in interpersonal relationships?") "To provide comfort." (Collaborator A)</i>



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Psychological support: *“A good solution would involve... I genuinely need someone supportive... Especially psychological support.” (Collaborator E)*

Privacy concerns: *“For instance, in order to address your issues, you would need to discuss them first, right? Then consider if you already trust that person and if you’re willing to share your problems, including matters of privacy.” (Collaborator E)*

*“I believe it depends on one’s personality. Perhaps online... and anonymously... being able to receive advice from various individuals and explore different opinions and solutions (for example, anonymously posting your problem online and receiving input from others).” (Collaborator F)*

The Significance of Such Activities

Readily embraced as a supportive approach: *“This format... I believe it facilitates easier conversation. For instance, if we simply talk in a circle... Individuals who struggle with self-expression and are introverted may gradually become less talkative and more inclined to listen.” (Collaborator B)*

*“Most importantly, this is virtual... because of that, people can express themselves more freely... allowing them to release what has been building up in their hearts.” (Collaborator D)*

Becomes an opportunity for interaction: *“I think the drama therapy method itself serves as an effective icebreaker. Additionally, it enhances communication.” (Collaborator D)*

*“Many international students may encounter difficulties like this (interpersonal problems in cross-cultural life)... With activities like this, as I mentioned before, through communication with others... it can be beneficial.” (Collaborator F)*

Expected effects of participation: *“I believe it’s significant. For example, some international students may feel as much pressure as I do when communicating with Japanese people... If they can experience this kind of positive communication (like in this workshop), they may gradually change their approach to communication and their communication style over time.” (Collaborator B)*

*“Another aspect is that through activities like this... New perspectives may emerge, fostering interest in others, encouraging mutual interaction, and potentially leading to new friendships.” (Collaborator D)*

*“One aspect is broadening one’s horizons and learning from others’ shared experiences... Another is recognizing that everyone has their own perspective... which can be enlightening for me.” (Collaborator F)*

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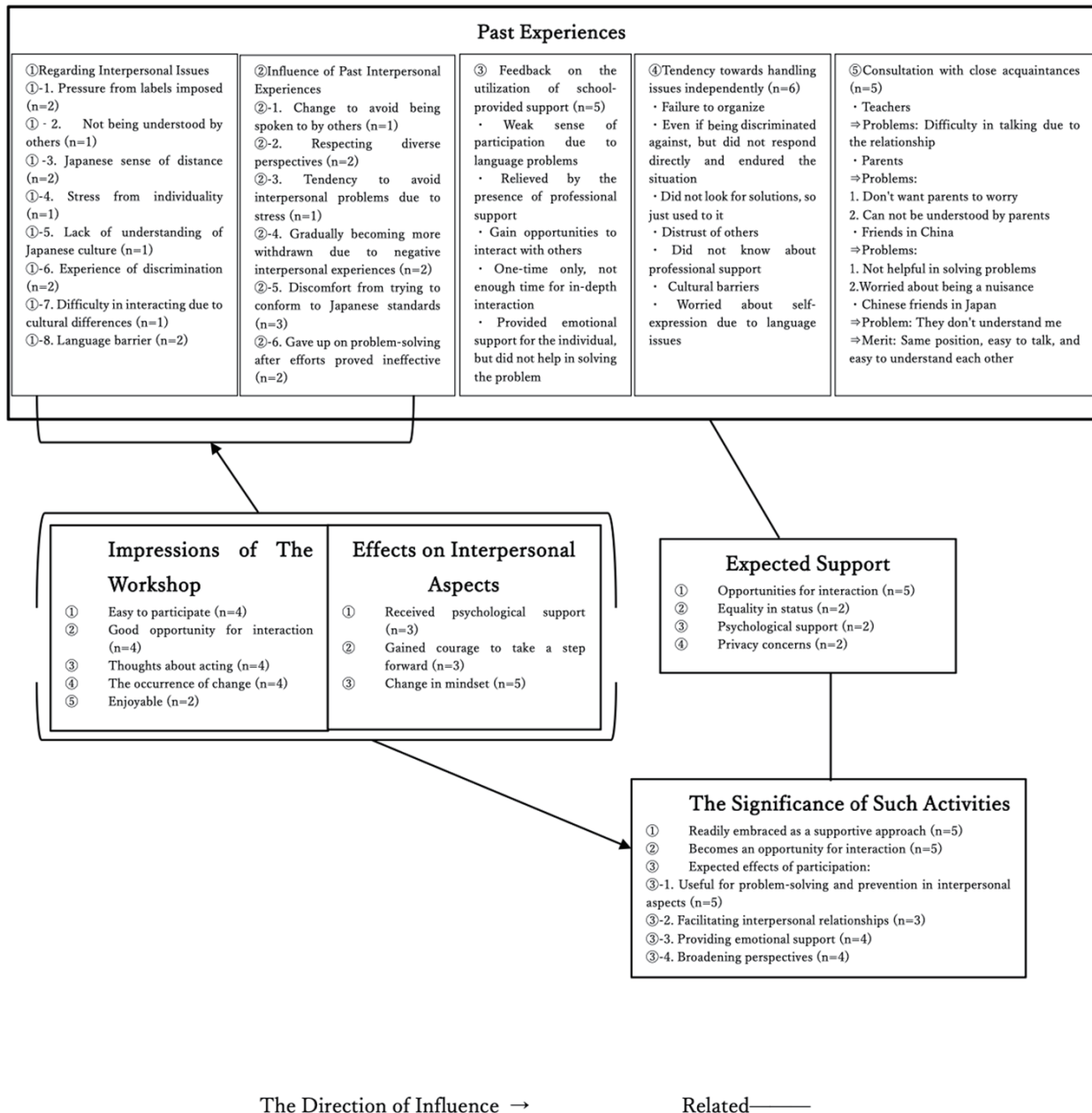


Figure 1. Relationships between the Themes in Table 4

### 3. Results

#### (1) Results of the Workshop

##### 1) The Importance of Warming-Up

The results indicate that warming up is indispensable for workshops incorporating drama therapy techniques, ensuring the smooth progression and enhanced effectiveness of subsequent activities. Although the basic design of the drama therapy workshop includes a warming-up phase for each time, the first workshop in this study serves as the overall warm-up phase for the entire activity.

Reviewing the video recordings of the workshops, it was observed that after the third game of the first workshop, collaborators began engaging in conversations unrelated to the activities

and displayed increased enthusiasm in the games. Furthermore, before the second workshop the following week, collaborators naturally started chatting with each other upon arrival. The following are some collaborator reflections on the warm-up phase:

*Collaborator B: "First of all, it definitely helped me relax... During the warm-up phase... as I interacted with them, the sense of distance I felt shrank. Because the distance shrank, I was able to relax and stopped worrying about being careful. The initial vigilance, or defensiveness, also disappeared."*

*Collaborator F: "At first, we might not talk much, but as we get used to it, it gets better. I was able to express my thoughts plainly... It became easier to express the state I wanted to portray."*

These reflections illustrate that the warm-up phase helps collaborators develop relationships with each other, become accustomed to performing, and feel comfortable in the environment. This well-prepared state facilitated collaborators' self-expression and made them more comfortable sharing personal experiences. Consequently, this positively impacted the discussions on interpersonal issues during their study abroad experience, which is essential for this research.

## **2) The Importance of Self-Expression and the Impact of Others' Attitudes**

The second workshop, the central part of the overall activity, primarily utilized Boal's Forum Theatre technique. Initially, collaborators performed the story of The Little Mermaid. In subsequent personal interviews, collaborators confirmed that performing this fairy tale provided them with new perspectives, allowing them to reflect on and rethink their study abroad experiences.

In the fairy tale enactment, collaborators faced a scene where they had to choose whether to drink the witch's potion, trading their voice and tail for human legs to enter human society. Many collaborators decided not to go through with it, often citing the loss of their voice as the reason. The mermaid's voice can be seen as a symbol of self-expression and communication abilities, highlighting the vital need for self-expression in a cross-cultural environment.

*Collaborator B: "If I went ashore, I wouldn't be able to speak... If I couldn't speak, I wouldn't be able to convey my feelings to the prince. If I couldn't speak..., would he have a prejudice against me, or hate me because I'm mute? If he couldn't love me, I would lose all hope. At that point, I wouldn't be able to return and would be alone (Thinking about it like that). I thought it was hopeless."*

Next, the impact of others' attitudes on adaptation to a different cultural society was observed. Collaborators frequently mentioned concerns about "not knowing the prince's attitude," "worrying about how others perceive them," and "fearing discrimination." Relating this to their study abroad experience, it is evident that the host country's attitude significantly affects cultural adaptation. For international students, it is important for people in the host country to show understanding and an accepting attitude.

## **3) New Perspectives Spark Further Reflection**

In the central part of the second workshop, collaborators performed and discussed past interpersonal issues using Boal's Forum Theatre technique. One shared issue involved a collaborator being misunderstood by a teacher at a Japanese language school. The collaborator went to the teacher's office to explain, but the teacher refused to listen, claiming not to understand the student's Japanese. Despite feeling the situation was unfair, the collaborator apologized to the teacher, considering their authority.

During the performance, collaborators tried various ways to handle the situation, such as using a translation device or not insisting on explaining to the teacher. This re-enactment sparked a lively discussion among the collaborators. Some shared similar experiences, while others

expressed concerns about handling issues due to their status as international students and the lack of supportive resources. The collaborator who shared the issue noted that watching others perform solutions, some of which reflected actions she had initially wanted to take, helped alleviate her frustration. She also remarked, “Looking back now, (studying abroad) is about interaction with others. Why did I have to unilaterally yield (when there was a problem)? I didn’t think of that at the time. Now, if I feel uncomfortable, I can express that to the other party.” Other collaborators also indicated that they learned various things from the experiences shared by others.

Thus, re-enacting past issues through drama therapy not only deepened collaborators’ understanding of the problems but also helped explore diverse solutions through discussion. This approach influenced their attitudes toward problem-solving. In essence, interactions with others can broaden one’s perspective.

## **(2) Analysis of the Individual Interviews**

Through the personal interviews conducted as an extended part of the workshop, more content was collected from the collaborators related to their evaluation of the workshop, their feelings during the workshop, their personal past experiences, and the changes that occurred. The content was analyzed and summarized into the following five categories.

### **1) Impressions of the Workshop**

The collaborators in the study were initially unfamiliar with drama therapy techniques and the performances themselves, but after participating in the workshops, they found them interesting and gave positive reviews. The relaxed and free atmosphere of the workshop allowed even introverts to connect and interact with others naturally. After synthesizing the collaborators’ comments, it can be confirmed that it was an excellent opportunity for communication, which was both healing and uplifting. Through in-depth discussions on intercultural life and hearing about others’ experiences, the workshop provided a space for meaningful exchanges. Additionally, by using drama therapy techniques to discuss interpersonal issues, collaborators could express themselves and recall their experiences from their study abroad more efficiently. For some, the drama therapy techniques helped change their perspective on relationship issues and gain new insights. Overall, the workshop was enjoyable, relaxing, and easy to participate in, and it positively influenced the discussions and resulted in favorable outcomes.

### **2) Effects on Interpersonal Aspects (After the Workshop)**

Collaborators received psychological support and positive interpersonal outcomes through participation in the workshops. Acting out and discussing unpleasant past experiences allowed collaborators to release emotions and obtain comfort and healing by confiding in and empathizing with others. By discussing past experiences and acting out various solutions in the workshop, collaborators healed their past unpleasant emotions and gained positive interpersonal experiences. This process gave them more courage to face interpersonal problems while studying abroad.

### **3) Past Experiences**

From the shared past interpersonal experiences, it was evident that cultural differences caused the most problems. Different cultural backgrounds lead to varying perceptions of society and culture and different understandings of relationship building, which can create challenges in maintaining relationships and resolving conflicts. Cultural differences also lead to stereotyping, with many collaborators reporting experiences of adverse treatment as a result. Additionally, being

labeled as “Chinese” or “Chinese students” made collaborators aware that their relationships would impact the host country’s image of China, prompting them to meet the host country’s expectations to avoid reinforcing negative perceptions and stereotypes, thus increasing their stress.

Past relationship experiences had different effects on collaborators. Unpleasant experiences could cause them to avoid and give up on solving relationship problems, while positive influences exposed them to different cultures and fostered respect for diverse ideas. Collaborators handled relationship issues in various ways; some sought support from others, while many preferred to solve, accept, adjust, and deal with problems independently. Some chose the support of their Chinese friends studying in Japan, who could understand their feelings and provide adequate emotional support. In contrast, one collaborator reported feeling comfortable with their presence when seeking support from schoolteachers and counselors. Still, many indicated that they did not know or did not tend to choose these supports due to concerns about language expression, cultural differences, or lack of mental health knowledge.

#### **4) Expected Support**

The study aimed to investigate the application of drama therapy techniques to support international students in addressing interpersonal issues in intercultural life. With this in mind, questions were posed to the collaborators to clarify the support they expected. The findings showed that the most desired support for international students is more opportunities for interaction. Interacting with the host country’s people, deepening mutual understanding through positional exchanges, enhancing cultural inclusiveness, and realizing equal and harmonious relations were highly valued. Additionally, international students wanted opportunities to interact with other international students to exchange experiences and gain peer support. Beyond interaction opportunities, international students need psychological support to alleviate the stress caused by interpersonal problems. Building mutual trust is essential, as some collaborators distrust others due to personality and past experiences, making privacy protection crucial. This study’s drama therapy techniques created a safe environment and built mutual trust, enabling collaborators to discuss their personal experiences safely.

#### **5) The Significance of Such Activities**

Collaborators commented positively on their experiences with the drama therapy approach. Drama therapy is easy to participate in, provides a safe environment, and has a relaxed and enjoyable format that facilitates self-expression. It met interaction needs and provided opportunities to interact with others. Collaborators felt that drama therapy activities offered meaningful support in dealing with interpersonal issues. They indicated that this approach provided new perspectives on problem-solving and positive communication experiences through role-playing. Collaborators could build relationships, expand their social circles, gain emotional support, and broaden their thinking by exchanging different perspectives with others. Consequently, collaborators had a positive attitude towards applying drama therapy to international students’ interpersonal relationship support, believing it to be a meaningful, supportive activity for effectively solving and preventing interpersonal relationship problems.

#### **6) Conclusion**

In summary, the shared past experiences reveal that many interpersonal issues faced by international students arise from differential treatment and concerns about language communication. These experiences lead to expectations of equal and mutually understanding interactions, which are also reflected in their desire for support in interpersonal issues. Feedback from collaborators

involved in this study indicates that activities incorporating drama therapy techniques provide a more accessible space for communication with others. Moreover, attempting solutions through performance helped alleviate the stress caused by past problems. Finally, the positive experiences gained from the workshops have led collaborators to express an expectation for similar support activities in the future.

In conclusion, aligned with the objectives of this study, it has been confirmed that drama therapy techniques positively impact the interpersonal issues of international students. Such techniques are expected to be utilized as interpersonal support for international students in the future.

## 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to clarify the intervention effects of drama therapy techniques on interpersonal issues among international students living in Japan and to explore their potential as a method for helping international students resolve these issues. The results from workshops and interviews confirmed that drama therapy techniques have a positive impact on the interpersonal problems of international students. Feedback from collaborators revealed that all respondents expressed positive attitudes toward applying this method, noting it as “effective for interpersonal relationships” and “meaningful for supporting international students.” Based on the verified participation effects, it is considered promising to incorporate drama therapy into future support for international students.

Two keywords emerged through the collaborators’ sharing of their experiences with interpersonal issues during the study activities: “communication” and “understanding.”

First, regarding “communication,” as previous studies have shown, the international students in this study also expressed the need for communication in their cross-cultural lives. Furthermore, through the performances in the workshops and the interviews, it was found that international students are conscious of the attitudes of others when communicating. Due to past experiences of differential treatment and concerns about their language abilities, international students need a space where or person to whom they can express themselves safely and reliably. In this regard, Emunah (2020) pointed out that one of the goals of drama therapy is the facilitation of social interaction and the development of interpersonal skills. Drama, as a form of collective art, is ideally suited to these aims. Activities that incorporate therapeutic drama techniques not only provide a place to connect with others, but also create an environment where participants feel safe to express themselves freely through thorough warm-ups in drama therapy workshops. Emunah (2020) also mentioned that in the initial stages of drama therapy,<sup>3</sup> the interaction and collaboration among group members facilitate group awareness and mutual support, accelerating the development of self-trust and trust in other participants, as well as in the therapist. Building a successful group is often a slow and rocky course, but drama offers a particular means of accelerating and strengthening this

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<sup>3</sup> Although the structure of drama therapy activities in the aforementioned paper was simplified into three parts, the widely used model in the current field of drama therapy is the integrated five-stage model. This model progresses from the interactive “Dramatic Play” to the theatrical “Scenework,” then to “Role Play” dealing with individual situations, followed by psychodramatic “Culminating Enactment” that explores deeply hidden issues, and finally moves to “Dramatic Ritual” for resolution. In this study, the term “warming up” refers to the initial stage (Dramatic Play) of the drama therapy session. This stage aims to familiarize participants with performing, adapting to the surrounding environment, building relationships with others, and awakening consciousness related to the roles in the drama. These activities are designed to facilitate deeper self-exploration in subsequent stages of the session.

process. Through the active sharing of personal experiences during performances and positive feedback in subsequent interviews, as well as their willingness to continue participating when opportunities arise, it is evident that drama therapy activities not only provide opportunities for mutual communication among collaborators but also promote trust relationships among them. This allows them to feel comfortable in the environment and engage in natural and profound communication. Moreover, in this research activity, the researcher also experienced the entire activity together with the collaborators. Reflective records after the activity revealed that through the warm-up phase at the beginning of the activity, the researcher also felt the establishment of a trusting relationship with the collaborators. This positive interaction encouraged the researcher, who gradually became more actively involved in guiding the activities. This positive interaction helped advance the content of the workshops and positively influenced the overall effectiveness of the activities. Previous studies and this research have found that international students tend to solve problems on their own or seek help from close ones when facing issues, showing resistance to professional support methods such as counseling. This resistance mainly stems from “distrust,” concerns about being misunderstood, anxiety about self-expression, and distrust of Japanese helpers. However, in drama therapy activities, people can build mutual trust and use physical expressions to help communicate. Therefore, it is believed that this form of assistance can better promote the willingness of international students to communicate. In summary, drama therapy activities provide good opportunities for “communication” for international students. Not only do they help establish connections with others, but they also offer a form of professional assistance that is easier to accept.

Another critical factor in the interpersonal issues of international students is “understanding.” Many collaborators’ experiences of discrimination due to stereotypes highlighted the importance of mutual understanding with the host country. Lack of mutual understanding can not only lead to unpleasant interpersonal experiences but can also result in resistance to seeking professional support, such as counseling predominantly provided by Japanese individuals. Therefore, understanding from the host country and towards the host country, or “other” understanding, is considered a significant influence on the interpersonal issues of international students. The importance of self-understanding among international students was also evident from the shared experiences. One collaborator mentioned, “If the researcher had not presented this issue (interpersonal problems in cross-cultural life), I would not have realized I had the same problem.” Another collaborator noted that he did not realize how his mood could affect his physical and daily condition. Some collaborators chose to handle their issues independently without seeking external help due to a lack of understanding of their stress, despite being aware of their stress levels. Improved self-understanding is therefore inferred to be crucial for correctly recognizing interpersonal issues and improving the situation.

The results of this study confirm that workshops incorporating drama therapy techniques facilitate natural and deep communication with others and enable perspective exchanges through role-playing, enhancing mutual understanding. In drama therapy workshops, re-enacting problems allows for the recreation of situations and emotions, providing opportunities for self-observation and exploration, which deepens self-understanding. The forum theater method by Boal used in this study enables collaborators to revisit past issues and experience various solutions, fostering “other” understanding by allowing them to view problems from different perspectives through role-playing. Additionally, collaborators with unpleasant interpersonal experiences reported that performing their problems in a positive feedback environment healed past traumas, released suppressed emotions, and provided new understandings and positive attitudes toward resolving issues. Boal’s techniques include performing solutions to problems, helping acquire different coping strategies, learning more problem-solving methods, and positively influencing attitudes toward problem-solving, contributing

to future problem resolution and prevention.

In conclusion, the findings of this study confirm that drama therapy techniques positively influence the interpersonal issues of international students. It is expected that incorporating these techniques into interpersonal support for international students will be beneficial.

However, this study only verified the effectiveness of drama therapy methods for Chinese students. Although Chinese students currently represent a significant proportion of international students in Japan, it is vital to examine the efficacy of these methods for international students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Future studies should include students from various countries and re-examine the effectiveness of these methods in a Japanese-language environment. Additionally, this study found that understanding and inclusive attitudes from the host country significantly impact the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. Drama therapy activities, through role-playing and experiencing different perspectives, are expected to improve mutual understanding between international students and the host country, thereby facilitating relationship building and adaptation. Therefore, future research should expand the target to include both Japanese and international students and examine the impact of drama therapy techniques on enhancing intercultural understanding and communication skills.

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