

## Cross-Cultural Exchange through Music: Exploring the Potential of PBL

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study explores the integration of Project-Based Learning (PBL) and music as a medium for cross-cultural exchange, focusing on band activities conducted during an exchange meeting at a Japanese music college. By analyzing the practices of international and Japanese students through the PBL framework, the study demonstrates how collaborative learning, student-led activities, and real-world problem-solving elements enhance intercultural communication skills and critical thinking. The findings suggest that combining PBL and music can create a more effective educational program for fostering global human resource development. This approach has the potential to bridge cultural gaps and provide students with opportunities to develop 21st-century skills in a practical and engaging way.*

**Keywords:-** *Project-Based learning, cross-cultural exchange, music, intercultural communication, higher education*

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background: Linking PBL and Music for Cross-Cultural Exchange

Both music and PBL offer unique opportunities to foster collaboration, critical thinking, and communication skills. In today's rapidly globalizing society, the ability to work effectively across cultures is no longer an option but a necessity. Educational institutions worldwide face the challenge of preparing students to engage meaningfully in diverse and interconnected global environments. At the core of this preparation lies the development of intercultural understanding and communication skills—essential competencies for fostering coexistence in multicultural contexts. These skills enable individuals to navigate differences, build mutual respect, and create opportunities for collaboration across cultural divides.

However, a Japanese music college often faces unique challenges in promoting globalization and intercultural engagement among students. With limited emphasis on foreign languages and multicultural topics, and a strong focus on traditional music curricula, students in these institutions often lack opportunities to engage in cross-cultural or multilingual experiences.

Despite these constraints, initiatives such as the band activities discussed in this study demonstrate how music-based Project-Based Learning (PBL), a learner-centered educational method that engages students in tackling real-world challenges through collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, which can bridge these gaps. This approach fosters linguistic skills, cultural understanding, and global competencies.

Building on Bell's (2010) [1] argument, PBL equips students with vital 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, teamwork, and adaptability. Barrows (1986) [2], one of the pioneers of PBL, provides a foundational framework that emphasizes structuring knowledge in real-world contexts and fostering both problem-solving skills and collaborative engagement. These objectives are achieved through active learning processes where students confront meaningful challenges and develop solutions in cooperative settings. Barrows further highlights the role of motivation in PBL, noting that authentic, student-driven activities naturally enhance learners' enthusiasm and commitment. Recent research, such as Anggraeni et al. (2023) [3], underscores PBL's effectiveness in fostering critical thinking and preparing students to address complex global issues with creativity and resilience.

Simultaneously, music holds a unique position as a universal language capable of transcending linguistic and cultural barriers. Music serves as a medium for expressing shared emotions, bridging divides, and

fostering empathy between groups. Campbell (1993) [4] and Fujiwara & Shioda (2002) [5] emphasize music's ability to promote intercultural understanding by enabling participants to connect on an emotional and experiential level. In the context of education, music provides fertile ground for fostering collaboration and cross-cultural exchange, particularly when combined with the principles of PBL.

Integrating PBL into music-related activities offers an opportunity to maximize the educational potential of both. For instance, Barros & Penna (2017) [6] illustrate how PBL bridges the gap between theory and practice in music education, encouraging autonomy, collaboration, and reflective thinking. Barrows' (1986) [2] taxonomy underscores the value of using structured, student-centered activities to engage learners in collaborative inquiry and self-directed exploration. Hunter (2018) [7] highlights how ethnomusicology courses applying PBL principles enable students to navigate cultural differences while engaging in hands-on, student-led learning. Hybrid approaches, such as Zhou et al.'s (2022) [8] integration of Chinese and Nepalese musical traditions, further demonstrate the adaptability of PBL to diverse cultural contexts. These studies collectively suggest that PBL's focus on collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability aligns seamlessly with music's capacity to foster connection and mutual understanding.

Despite these promising findings, the intersection of PBL and music in fostering cross-cultural exchange remains underexplored. While theoretical frameworks and isolated examples exist, few studies have systematically examined how music can serve as a structured medium for PBL-based intercultural education (Tobias et al., 2015) [9]. Addressing this gap, this study focuses on the band activities of international and Japanese students during an "exchange meeting with international students" at a Japanese music college. By analyzing these activities through a PBL framework, the research investigates how music-mediated cross-cultural exchange can be transformed into structured educational programs that foster global competencies.

### 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze, from the perspective of PBL, collaborative band activities involving international and Japanese students at a Japanese music college. Previous research on music education and PBL highlights a significant gap, as practical studies that explicitly link these two areas remain scarce (Tobias et al., 2015) [8]. This study aims to uncover how these activities foster intercultural understanding, communication skills, and critical thinking, and how they can be transformed into structured educational programs designed to enhance students' intercultural and collaborative skills.

### 1.3 Research questions

- 1) How do the band activities reflect the principles of PBL?
- 2) How can music-based cross-cultural exchange be structured within a PBL framework?
- 3) What are the educational outcomes of integrating PBL with music-based intercultural exchange?

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

### 2.1 Participants

This study involved a band of two international students (from China and Australia) and four Japanese students. The band was created for an "exchange meeting with international students" hosted by the Global Center, at a private music college in Japan in November 2024. These students initially met during the "International Hour," a weekly lunchtime event facilitated by the author of this paper. The formation of the band was suggested by the chairperson of the Global Center with the goal of showcasing their performance at the exchange meeting. The band performed five J-POP songs in a 30-minute session during the event.

### 2.2 Research Approach and Ethics

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, and the main method was single case analysis. In particular, it was an exploratory case study that analyzed the practice of the band performance of the international students and Japanese students mentioned above from the perspective of PBL. This research was conducted as part of educational activities, and the research subjects were fully informed of the purpose and methods of the research in advance, and their written consent was obtained (informed consent). The collected data was anonymized and managed and analyzed in a way that fully considered privacy protection.

### 2.3 Data Collection Methods

The data was collected using the following methods:

#### 1) Participant observation:

The author observed the band's interactions before and during rehearsals, as well as at the event, taking detailed field notes on collaboration, decision-making, and communication. Particular attention was given to how the students addressed cultural and musical challenges in a collaborative context.

## 2) Product analysis:

The author collected and analyzed a video of the band performance (approx. 30 minutes) and a video edited by one of the students who performed in the band (approx. 3 minutes).

### 2.4 Analysis method

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [10] was used to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data. This method provides a systematic approach to analyzing textual and visual data, allowing for the extraction of recurring themes. The process involved:

#### 1) Familiarization and Initial Coding

The author reviewed the field notes and videos repeatedly to identify initial codes. These codes captured elements of PBL, such as “collaborative learning,” “problem-solving,” “communication strategies,” and “cultural negotiation.”

#### 2) Theme Development

The codes were organized into broader themes, including:

- Collaborative Learning: Instances where students worked together to overcome challenges.
- Practical Problem-Solving: Efforts to address musical and cultural differences.
- Communication Methods: The use of both verbal and non-verbal communication to bridge cultural gaps.
- Cultural Differences and Adaptation: Moments highlighting the impact of diverse cultural perspectives on the group dynamic.

#### 3) Integration and Synthesis

The themes were synthesized to reveal specific ways in which PBL principles facilitated collaborative problem-solving, effective communication, and cultural adaptation during the band activities.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Elements of PBL in the Band Activities

While the band practice was not explicitly designed as PBL, several PBL elements naturally emerged:

#### 1) Structuring Knowledge in Context:

Barrows (1986) [2] highlights the importance of structuring knowledge within real-world or clinical contexts to facilitate its recall and application. In the band activities, students tackled the challenge of performing “Yuki no Hana” in a cross-cultural context. Discussions about Japanese and Chinese pronunciation and the cultural nuances in musical expression created a concrete framework for applying and structuring their linguistic and musical knowledge in a meaningful context.

#### 2) Practical Problem-Solving:

The collaborative resolution of musical and cultural challenges showcased students' application of problem-solving skills. For instance, harmonizing diverse musical interpretations required negotiation and consensus-building, aligning with the reasoning processes discussed by Bell (2010) [1]. This integration of cultural awareness with practical problem-solving demonstrates the broader educational utility of PBL in cross-cultural contexts.

#### 3) Self-Directed Learning:

Students independently proposed and finalized song selections, exemplifying autonomy in their learning processes. This aligns with Barros & Penna (2017) [6], who emphasize the role of student-driven decision-making in fostering independence and creativity in music education.

#### 4) Collaborative Learning:

Collaborative efforts were central to the band's success, particularly as international and Japanese students distributed roles such as guitar, drums, and vocals. The cooperative preparation process mirrored the teamwork and shared responsibility described by Hunter (2018) [7]. This dynamic fostered knowledge sharing and mutual growth, reflecting the collaborative nature of PBL.

#### 5) Enhanced Motivation:

Barrows (1986) [2] argues that real-world relevance and student-driven activities inherently boost motivation. The students' enthusiasm for J-POP and their active participation in a meaningful performance project demonstrate the intrinsic motivational benefits associated with PBL.

#### 6) Effective Communication:

Communication, a key component of PBL, played a vital role in the band's success, enabling students to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps. Both LINE (a messaging app) and face-to-face meetings were used effectively to facilitate interactions. Visual elements such as photos and videos shared on LINE, combined with gestures and instrumental demonstrations during in-person rehearsals, showcased the students' ability to employ diverse communication strategies to achieve mutual understanding. Despite the college's limited emphasis on foreign languages or intercultural topics, the band activities provided a unique opportunity for natural language learning. Japanese students, who traditionally have minimal exposure to such environments, gained confidence in using English and even engaged with Chinese. International students, in turn, developed a deeper appreciation for Japanese culture and teamwork. These real-world interactions not only enhanced linguistic proficiency but also fostered emotional connections and mutual respect among participants. This aligns with Campbell (1993) [4], who highlights the role of music as a tool for fostering intercultural connections. By integrating practical communication tools and creating authentic contexts, the band activities exemplify how PBL can transform cross-cultural dialogue into meaningful learning experiences.

The band activities effectively align with Barrows' (1986) framework for PBL [2], reflecting its core principles: contextualized learning, collaborative engagement, student autonomy, and enhanced motivation. By addressing a real-world challenge in a student-centered manner, the band's approach resonates strongly with the ideals of PBL. This alignment underscores the potential of integrating PBL strategies into cross-cultural and creative activities, even in contexts not explicitly designed as PBL.

### 3.2 Restructuring the Activities within a PBL Framework

The following points can be considered as possibilities for restructuring the "exchange meeting with international students" within the framework of PBL:

#### 1) Setting clear learning objectives:

Set specific learning objectives related to cross-cultural understanding and international collaboration. Teachers could act as facilitators, helping students align their goals with the broader educational framework, as PBL encourages the development of critical thinking, adaptability, and teamwork (Bell, 2010) [1]. In addition, teachers can integrate objectives that highlight the importance of sharing learning outcomes with a wider audience. For instance, goals such as "prepare a presentation for peers and faculty" or "articulate cultural insights gained through the performance" can encourage students to approach the project with a broader perspective.

#### 2) Introducing project planning:

Systematizing the event as a project would encourage a cohesive learning experience. Teachers could support students in outlining stages such as brainstorming, song selection, practice schedules, and post-event reflection. To ensure the project aligns with educational goals, teachers can help students integrate specific milestones, such as:

- Organizing internal rehearsals and feedback sessions to refine their performance.
- Preparing for a formal showcase at the college, such as an art festival or an event organized by the Global Center.
- Encouraging team members to collaboratively manage project tasks, such as musical arrangements and event logistics.

Furthermore, the inclusion of real-world presentation opportunities, such as performing in front of a diverse audience, provides students with a meaningful context to demonstrate their skills and reflect on their learning.

#### 3) Reflection and evaluation:

Reflection sessions guided by teachers are essential for reinforcing learning. Following the performance, teachers can facilitate discussions that encourage students to critically evaluate their experiences. For example:

- How did cultural differences influence collaboration?
- What communication strategies were most effective in overcoming challenges?
- By embedding reflection into the project timeline, teachers can help students synthesize their experiences and connect them to broader intercultural competencies.

#### 4) Enhancing communication skills:

Teachers can design activities or workshops focusing on verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, drawing on Barrows' emphasis on fostering practical problem-solving skills [2]. For instance:

- Role-playing scenarios that highlight cultural differences in gestures, expressions, and negotiation styles.
- Interactive sessions on how to adapt communication for diverse audiences during presentations or performances.

These activities prepare students not only for the event itself but also for future cross-cultural interactions.

#### 5) Use of technology:

Teachers can encourage the use of online tools and social media platforms to facilitate continuous communication before and after the event. For example:

- Creating a shared online workspace for exchanging ideas, tracking progress, and sharing rehearsal materials.
- Using digital platforms to showcase student performances, allowing for wider feedback and engagement beyond the university.

By integrating these strategies, the event could more effectively foster 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and intercultural understanding, as identified by Bell (2010) [1]. The structured alignment of project planning with real-world contexts ensures that students can maximize their learning experiences while building practical and transferable skills.

### 3.3 Educational Potential

The integration of music and PBL within cross-cultural exchange programs offers unique educational opportunities by combining the expressive and collaborative nature of music with the practical, student-centered approach of PBL. The following benefits illustrate the educational potential of this integration:

#### 1) Integrated skill development:

Beyond musical abilities, participants develop a range of interdisciplinary skills, including project management, intercultural communication, and critical thinking. For instance, making decisions about performance styles or interpreting music collaboratively requires negotiation and consensus-building, which are transferable to diverse professional contexts. Teachers play a pivotal role in creating structured opportunities for students to develop these skills, such as facilitating discussions on cultural nuances or guiding the logistical planning of a performance.

#### 2) Practical cross-cultural understanding:

Collaborative music-making embedded in a PBL framework allows students to engage directly with cultural differences in real-world scenarios. For example, during the band activities, students navigated differences in musical styles, such as blending traditional Japanese melodies with Chinese harmonic structures, and overcame language barriers during rehearsals. Teachers can enhance this by organizing pre-performance workshops on cultural sensitivity or inviting guest speakers to share insights on global music practices. Through the common language of music, mutual understanding that transcends differences in language and culture is possible.

#### 3) Natural Language Learning through Authentic Use:

The use of foreign languages in meaningful and authentic contexts enhances natural language acquisition. In the band activities, students communicated in multiple languages, including Japanese, English, and Chinese, as they coordinated rehearsals and prepared for the performance. These real-world interactions not only improved linguistic proficiency but also built confidence in practical communication by requiring students to adapt to diverse linguistic and cultural dynamics. For example, translating lyrics into Chinese, exploring cultural themes in Chinese music, or engaging in bilingual rehearsals provided students with hands-on opportunities to apply their language skills. Such experiences are particularly valuable in preparing students for academic and professional settings where multilingual communication is increasingly essential.

#### 4) Improvement of creativity and problem-solving ability:

The creative process inherent in music provides a rich environment for innovative problem-solving. By encouraging students to blend diverse musical interpretations, teachers can guide them in finding solutions that respect both individual expression and group harmony. For example, students might explore how traditional Japanese melodies can be fused with Western harmonic structures, fostering both creativity and critical thinking.

#### 5) Emotional and Social Development:

Music as a universal language provides a platform for emotional expression and social connection. Collaborative music-making encourages empathy and mutual respect among participants from diverse backgrounds. Despite the college's limited emphasis on foreign languages or intercultural topics, the band activities allowed students to engage naturally in cross-cultural interactions. Japanese students, who traditionally

have minimal exposure to such environments, gained confidence in using English and even engaged with Chinese. Simultaneously, international students developed a deeper appreciation for Japanese culture and teamwork. These interactions fostered emotional connections and mutual respect, enhancing both linguistic and cultural competencies. Teachers can further support this development by encouraging reflective journaling or group discussions on the emotional impact of their collaborative experiences. These reflective practices help students internalize their experiences and connect them to broader intercultural and educational goals. These advantages align with Barrows' emphasis on structuring learning experiences to combine practical problem-solving with collaborative exploration [2]. Furthermore, they support the contributions of music education to emotional and social development (Hallam, 2010) [11], showcasing the potential for interdisciplinary growth.

By embedding PBL principles into music-based intercultural exchange programs, colleges can cultivate globally competent individuals equipped with the skills and mindset to navigate an increasingly interconnected world. Teachers, as facilitators of this process, play a crucial role in maximizing these educational benefits by fostering an environment of collaboration, creativity, critical reflection, and authentic language use.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrated the potential for linking cross-cultural exchange through music and PBL by analyzing the practice of the "exchange meeting with international students" at a music college from the perspective of PBL. The 'exchange meeting with international students' already incorporates elements of PBL and has the potential for further systematization into a more effective educational program. This study confirmed that the elements of PBL, such as practical tasks, collaborative learning, and student-led activities, were evident in the activities and demonstrated the educational potential of cross-cultural exchange through music.

However, this study has certain limitations, including its focus on a single case study and the lack of verification of long-term educational effects. To address these issues, it is necessary to design and implement a music exchange program that explicitly incorporates the PBL framework. Additionally, longitudinal research is required to assess the long-term impact of such programs. Offering elective courses that integrate PBL principles could further enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives.

Moreover, Japanese music colleges face unique challenges in promoting globalization and intercultural engagement among students. With limited emphasis on foreign languages and multicultural topics, as well as a strong focus on traditional music curricula, students often lack opportunities to engage in cross-cultural or multilingual experiences. By incorporating PBL principles into music-based intercultural exchange programs, colleges can address these challenges by providing students with authentic contexts to develop linguistic, intercultural, and collaborative skills. Such initiatives not only bridge the gap in traditional music education but also align with global demands for interdisciplinary and practical skillsets.

This approach offers several promising possibilities. First, music exchange programs that incorporate PBL offer practical opportunities for foreign language use, promoting both linguistic proficiency and professional skills such as teamwork and project management. Second, such programs combining intercultural exchange and PBL have the potential to add new value to traditional music education curricula, thereby differentiating college education programs in an increasingly competitive educational landscape. Third, PBL mediated by music provides an opportunity to integrate knowledge and skills from interdisciplinary fields such as intercultural communication, language education, project management, and music education.

With these prospects in mind, music colleges can expand their educational offerings beyond the traditional framework of specialized education. By embedding PBL principles into music-based intercultural exchange programs, colleges can cultivate well-rounded individuals equipped with interdisciplinary skills. Such initiatives are expected to foster globally competent graduates who can thrive in diverse professional environments while addressing the specific challenges faced by Japanese music colleges.

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