

# Foreign Reactions to Japan as a Teaching Resource

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One overlooked aspect of language teaching is the importance of also teaching culture. Communicating with people from different cultures involves not just linguistic competence, but also intercultural awareness. Additionally, cultural literacy about the target culture can improve fluency in the target language. Despite the role of culture in language teaching, there are obstacles to creating culture-rich language courses. First, identifying what the target culture is in EFL settings such as Japan can be a challenge. Second, traditional EFL coursebooks are often not designed to also sufficiently teach culture. One remedy to these issues is to first focus on the students' own culture. Many students, however, are not certain as to what makes their own culture interesting or unique. In this paper, I examine using foreign reactions to Japan as a resource for helping Japanese students better understand and explain their own culture in English.

言語と文化の統合教育の試みにおいて、EFL教師はターゲット言語の文化についての習得に焦点を置く傾向がある。しかしながら、学生に英語で自国の文化の説明や議論をすることができるように支援していく必要があることについては、あまり認識されていない。その要因として、関連教材が少ないため、このような授業に対する取り組みが難しくなっていることが考えられる。こうした背景にもとづいて、本稿では日本の大学の英語の授業の中で、日本文化に焦点を当てた授業の取り組みが可能になるような方法と教材について論じる。

**I**N OUR ever-internationalizing world, more and more pressure is put on Japanese universities to produce students highly proficient in English. Companies such as Rakuten and Uniqlo have gone so far as to establish English as the official workplace language. Schools and companies, however, need a convenient means by which to measure English proficiency. The most common method of measuring this proficiency is by standardized tests such as the TOEIC, which has seen more than a five-fold increase in Japanese test-takers in the past 20 years ("Adopting English," 2011).

Relying on such standardized tests, however, has obvious drawbacks. As the TOEIC test does not have a speaking component, a high score does not guarantee fluency in English. Of equal importance is the fact that a high test score also does not reflect intercultural competence, an overlooked element of language proficiency. Many researchers have argued that intercultural competence needs to be an integral component of foreign language instruction. Krasner (1999) stated that linguistic competence alone is not enough to be proficient



in a foreign language. Byram and Risager (1999) similarly maintained that the role of language teachers is not limited to teaching linguistic forms, but includes cultural competence. In other words, we cannot communicate effectively in the target language without also knowing about the target culture. Genc and Bada (2005) thus dismissed language teaching as “inaccurate and incomplete” (p. 73) without the accompanying teaching of culture.

### The Role of Culture in Language Teaching

Why is such an emphasis placed on the role of culture in language teaching? First, as Peterson and Coltrane (2003) pointed out, “in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behavior” (p. 1). Foreign language learners need to know the proper ways of, for example, greeting, asking advice, or apologizing. To give one example in the context of Japan, it is not uncommon for Japanese to ask someone in English “How old are you?” just after meeting for the first time. This may be appropriate in Japan, where the *senpai/kohai* (senior/junior) hierarchy places a great value on age. In the West, however, where age is a more sensitive issue, such a question could be dismissed as rude and inappropriate. This example illustrates the claim by Gao (2005) that communication and culture are inseparable. Another example would be the countless times my Japanese students have awkwardly addressed me as “Mr. John” or “John-teacher,” as they fail to find the proper linguistic balance between honorific Japanese and the American tendency to use first names.

Using direct translation when studying a foreign language can result in inappropriate language use. Considering a Japanese language example, if you ask how to say *goodbye* in Japanese, you might be told *Mata ne*. If you used such an expression when leaving the office at the end of a workday, however, your language could be dismissed as inappropriate or rude. Office

greetings in Japan are divided into a rigid series of set phrases, so in this context the more formal *Osaki ni shitsurei shimasu* [Excuse me for leaving before you] is necessary. When speaking a foreign language, it is therefore possible to have perfect grammar and pronunciation, yet still be culturally inappropriate, illustrating Chlopek’s (2008) warning that “communication that lacks appropriate cultural content . . . is the source of serious miscommunication and misunderstanding” (p. 10). About the need for Japanese learners of English to also understand the target culture, Ogawa (2011) argued that this honorific nature of the Japanese language is one reason many Japanese fail to become confident speakers of the more direct English language. Again, memorizing vocabulary lists may improve one’s TOEIC score, but it does not guarantee intercultural competence.

Another reason for the importance of culture in language learning is the issue of cultural literacy. This term first gained widespread attention with the release of E. D. Hirsch’s (1987) seminal work in which he attempted to outline the “shared knowledge” which Americans need in order to “communicate effectively with everyone else” (p. 32). Although Hirsch was not writing in the context of foreign language education, researchers in this field have also emphasized the importance of cultural literacy in language learning, arguing that communicating effectively with someone from the target culture entails not only a knowledge of linguistic features, but also a familiarity with, for example, that culture’s famous people, places, and historical events. A study by Ziesing (2001) established a correlation between language fluency and cultural literacy. In other words, the more we know about someone else’s culture, the more smoothly we will be able to communicate in the target language.

Cultural literacy refers not just to people and places, but also to culture-specific idioms and slang. My Japanese students in New Zealand were initially perplexed when locals invited them for a *cuppa*, not understanding the local slang for a *cup of tea* or

*coffee*. Going back to the shortcomings of standardized English tests such as the TOEIC when it comes to cultural knowledge, *cuppa* is obviously not the type of vocabulary item you would need to know for such a test. If you were going to actually communicate with New Zealanders, however, it could very well be one of the first words you would need.

## Challenges of Integrating Language and Culture Teaching

Effectively implementing culture-rich language courses, however, comes with many challenges. As with many other components of any curriculum, time itself is often the main obstacle. As one teacher (Hong, 2008) wrote, culture teaching “is ignored simply because language teachers feel that they do not have enough time to talk about the target culture in regular language classes” (p. 2). As this paper argues for a fuller integration of language and culture teaching, I would like to focus more specifically on two common obstacles faced in EFL contexts such as Japan.

### What is the Target Culture?

In most EFL contexts, it is arguable whether we can define what the target culture is. Should we focus on the culture of inner circle countries such as the United States, England, and Australia as target cultures of English? With the rise of English as a global language and the number of nonnative speakers of the language far exceeding the number of native speakers, a Japanese person could be just as likely to communicate in English with someone from Germany or Egypt as someone from Canada or New Zealand. This more far-reaching potential of English seems to be what Cates (2004) referred to when he called English “an international language for communication with people from around the world” and a subject for “learning about the world’s

peoples, countries, and problems” (p. 31). As promising as this approach sounds, time once again becomes an issue. With the typical university English course limited to 15 lessons, there is a limit to how much foreign culture we can expose our students to.

A further complication arises when you consider the needs of individual students. Although Japanese universities do offer classes such as study abroad preparation, a majority of classes are general English classes for students with a great variety of needs and interests. Even in study abroad preparatory courses, it is not uncommon that the students will not be studying at the same institution, but rather at a range of different institutions scattered across the globe. Even in this context in which cultural knowledge is of greater importance, it is difficult to define what the target culture actually is and, thus, what type of cultural content should be included.

### Limitations of EFL Teaching Materials

This difficulty of defining the target culture can be reflected in EFL teaching materials used in Japan. Culture is not properly emphasized in a majority of coursebooks. Many books do attempt to include a “Culture Corner” type of feature, but this again relegates culture to something that seems merely tacked on and not a core component of the course. In a culture-rich language course, culture should be “always in the background, right from day one” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1).

One reason many current EFL coursebooks fail to be proper vehicles for culture-rich classes is that they are not Japan specific. If books are intended to be sold and used by EFL students in a number of different countries, it is difficult to make specific cultural comparisons between the featured target cultures and Japan. Additionally, the average coursebook user in Country A may have different background knowledge

and cross-cultural interests than the user in Country B, making it difficult to add much culturally rich material to the text. Featuring culture in a tacked-on manner can actually do more harm than good; studies by Fischer (1998) and Kilickaya (2004) criticized the over-generalized presentations of foreign culture in EFL coursebooks.

This issue with a lack of proper culture-rich teaching materials means that individual teachers are left to their own devices in preparing a great deal of supplementary materials and activities. It again becomes a matter of having enough time to design courses that fully integrate culture and language teaching.

### Starting with the Students' Own Culture

Given the difficulties of defining the target culture and the lack of culture-rich EFL teaching materials, one option is to start by looking at the students' own culture as a foundation for raising awareness about intercultural competence and cultural identity. While the importance of integrating culture learning with language learning has been firmly established, such an approach has usually emphasized looking outward. Literature on this topic tends to focus on what foreign language students need to know about the target culture in order to communicate effectively. However, this is only part of the equation. Intercultural communication entails *exchanging* cultural information. Japanese speakers of English are not just investigators of foreign culture, but also representatives of their own culture.

To return to the importance of cultural literacy, it makes perfect sense for students preparing to study abroad in the United States, for example, to learn as much as possible about the future host culture in order to improve their ability to communicate with local people. However, it is equally important for these Japanese students to be prepared to discuss their own culture in English, as they will likely be asked countless ques-

tions about Japan. Additionally, they may be required to give presentations about their own culture. An inability to describe Japanese culture in English can cause just as many communication problems as a lack of awareness about American culture. While we as English language educators want to do our best to prepare our students to achieve both language proficiency and intercultural competence, we also have to remember that acculturation is defined as not just being able to function in a new culture, but also retaining one's own culture (Corbett, 2003). Even if our students remain overseas long-term, they will always be representatives of Japan and have the need to express their unique cultural identities in English.

### Challenges of Discussing Japanese Culture in English Classes

Using Japanese culture as a starting point for increasing intercultural competence comes with its own challenges and limitations. First, as with young people around the world, a majority of Japanese university students have not yet spent a significant amount of time in a foreign country. When discussing cultural differences between Japan and foreign cultures, it helps to have some real experiences to build on. Although many students do have an interest in cross-cultural issues, they often do not have enough firsthand experiences—whether overseas or within Japan—to make informed cross-cultural comparisons.

Perhaps due to this lack of cross-cultural interactions, when it comes to defining what exactly makes Japan unique many Japanese give oversimplified explanations. For several years I have served as an English interviewer for cross-cultural exchange programs between Japan and other countries. One question I regularly ask Japanese interviewees is, "What do you think makes Japan a unique or special country?" By far, the most common answer given is that Japan is unique because it

has four seasons. This is certainly not unique. Another popular answer is that Japan is unique because it is an island nation. Throughout history Japan has indeed referred to the *shimaguni konjou* (island nation mentality), which has had a great effect on the national character. Again, however, from a geographical standpoint, being an island nation is not terribly unique. We should not necessarily dismiss these answers as incorrect, but they do require a lot more clarification. A culture-rich curriculum in which students have more opportunities to describe their own culture in English would help better prepare them for this necessary clarification.

### Foreign Reactions to Japan as a Teaching Resource

What the above challenges suggest is that students also need the input of non-Japanese perspectives to help them better comprehend and describe their own culture. The teacher can give opportunities for practicing vocabulary related to Japan and Japanese culture. As a native of upstate New York, for example, I can explain to students that I also come from a place with the four seasons and provide guidance for helping them to better articulate what exactly makes the four seasons of Japan special and unique. Finally, students will also undoubtedly be able to state some obvious, surface-level cultural differences, such as using chopsticks versus using silverware. In order to truly become more interculturally aware, however, students need a greater number of perspectives about what people from other cultures have found interesting or different about Japanese culture. This variety of perspectives will provide students with a better foundation for knowing what they need to be able to express about their culture in English in order to better communicate in intercultural settings.

### Newspaper Columns as a Source of Foreign Perspectives of Japan

One resource for using foreign perspectives of Japan in the classroom is English-language newspapers such as *The Japan Times*. Letters to the editors or different columns often feature non-Japanese reactions to Japan. One resource I have frequently turned to is the columns of Alice Gordenker. Gordenker's first column, "Matter of Course," ran from 2001 to 2004 and focused on educational issues. As the American mother of two children attending Japanese elementary schools, Gordenker described customs she found surprising about Japanese schools, such as *ensoku* [school excursions], *hogoshakai* [parents' meetings], or *ondoku* [reading-out-loud]. These are aspects of the education system that most Japanese might take for granted.

Gordenker's current column "So, What the Heck is That?" has run monthly since 2005 until the present. In this column, Gordenker explains objects from daily life in Japan which non-Japanese readers find peculiar or interesting. After receiving questions about the respective objects, Gordenker researches the topic and then publishes a detailed explanation. Some topics covered have included *mimikaki* [ear picks], *noshibukuro* [decorative Japanese envelopes used for money giving], and *waipu* [screen-in-screen pop-ups that are a constant feature of Japanese television programs]. Although researched by Gordenker, the original questions come from non-Japanese, both in Japan and abroad.

### Advantages of the Columns

When I piloted these columns in my university classes, my students were particularly intrigued by the foreign reactions to everyday aspects of Japanese culture that they had taken for granted. Additionally, students were surprised to find that Gordenker's columns could also teach them new things about

their own culture, such as why Japanese five-yen coins have holes in the middle or the origins of White Day. In addition to the positive student response, I found several other advantages to the columns as a teaching resource.

The basis of Gordenker's current column is real questions submitted by non-Japanese readers. This use of real questions justifies the authenticity of using the columns as a teaching resource. If the columns are dealing with actual questions about Japan submitted by non-Japanese, it is worthwhile practice for Japanese students to also attempt to explain these aspects of Japanese culture in English. This gives Japanese students a more realistic sense of what non-Japanese find interesting or peculiar about their culture, potentially increasing their awareness about cultural differences between Japan and other countries.

The fact that Gordenker's columns are also based on first-hand research lends them authority for use in the classrooms. Rather than merely giving a cursory explanation to answer the questions, Gordenker actually interviews Japanese experts about the subjects in question. This adds authenticity to the readings and a content-based component to the resource. The topics covered by Gordenker are subjects Japanese are generally very familiar with but may not actually know the history of. By reading these columns, Japanese students are not only studying English, but also learning about their own culture, thus increasing their cultural literacy about Japan.

### **A Framework for Designing Culture-Rich Courses**

The discussion in this paper argues for culture to be a core component of language classes, rather than something that is merely auxiliary. There is a need for an organized and systematized teaching of culture in language classes. One way to address this need is the creation of university-level textbooks that more fully

integrate language and cultural content. With this approach in mind, I contacted the newspaper column author about modifying a selection of her columns to make a textbook for university English classes in Japan. The result is a textbook entitled *Surprising Japan* (Gordenker & Rucynski, 2013), comprised of 15 units based on her columns. The goal was to create a resource that ensured that culture was a part of every single lesson. Furthermore, my students were exposed to a wide range of foreign reactions to Japan, thus satisfying Byram and Risager's (1999) assertion that the role of the language teacher is to teach both language and culture.

The discussion in this paper stresses two reasons why culture has an important role in language teaching. First, communicating effectively with someone from a different culture requires not just linguistic competence, but also an understanding of cultural values and behavior. Second, cultural literacy has a positive effect on language fluency. Cultural literacy refers in this context to not just knowing about the target culture, but also being knowledgeable about your own culture and being able to describe it in the target language. These two criteria were considered when choosing topics and designing activities for the textbook.

When considering the above two criteria, different types of cultural differences are better suited to satisfy each one. When discussing cultural differences, Shaules (2010) distinguished between explicit and implicit differences. The former refer to more obvious, concrete differences (such as the "four Fs" of *food, festivals, folklore, and facts*), while the latter refer to behaviors or values which are more difficult to uncover, leading Hall (1966) to initially label them "hidden culture." In a culture-rich course, it is important to have a mix of both. Explicit examples serve as a foundation for building students' confidence and ability to describe their own culture in English. Meanwhile, implicit examples are necessary to help students grasp more complex dif-

ferences and consider cultural identity more deeply. As a culture learning material, the textbook introduces students to both the surface elements as well as to the deeper elements of their own culture. (See Appendix for a full list of topics).

One example of explicit culture chosen for the textbook was a column comparing *wagashi* [Japanese sweets] and *yogashi* [Western sweets]. With the recent global boom in interest in Japanese food, this serves as a good topic for cross-cultural communication. Still, describing Japanese foods in English can be quite challenging, considering the wide range of dishes and ingredients. Reading about the health benefits of *wagashi*, however, could be one way for Japanese students to both learn more about their own food culture and also acquire more vocabulary required to explain it in English. Another column discusses the Japanese-created custom of White Day. As this event started before current Japanese university students were born, some may be unaware of its origins. Knowing the history of such Japanese events makes students more aware of their own culture and can potentially improve their ability to smoothly explain these explicit differences when communicating in English with people from other countries.

Whereas discussing explicit differences has the potential to improve cultural literacy and fluency, implicit differences serve to improve students' awareness of different culturally bound behaviors and values. One example of implicit culture chosen for the book was the tendency in Japan to offer gender-specific discounts. Whereas many Japanese regard such discounts positively as favorable treatment (*yūgū*), they may be surprised to hear that some people from other cultures might actually consider them discrimination (*sabetsu*). Another example is the tendency for Japanese parents not to praise their own children at parents' meetings (*hogoshakai*), which highlights, in this case, different communication styles of Japanese and Americans. Exposing students to such implicit differences can raise their awareness

that communicating in intercultural contexts involves not just language ability, but also culturally appropriate behavior. The 15 different examples in the textbook of what people from a variety of different cultures find surprising about Japan can hopefully serve as a foundation for helping Japanese students realize that achieving true English competence involves not only getting a high TOEIC score, but also the ability to communicate with people with different cultural values.

### Language Learning Component

While the discussion thus far has been on how this framework can give language classes a stronger cultural element, language development itself cannot be overlooked. Students need not only a stronger understanding of their own culture, but also the language to express these ideas in English. As culture teaching should consider both examples of explicit and implicit culture, language teaching should provide a mix of structured and open-ended activities. To assist and check understanding of the reading passages, each unit of *Surprising Japan* includes a prereading vocabulary check and postreading comprehension questions. It is vital to monitor student understanding of the main points of each reading before moving on to more open-ended activities such as class discussions. Additionally, these exercises provide opportunities for recycling the key vocabulary. Finally, each unit includes a listening exercise that introduces new words and expressions connected to the respective unit theme.

As different English courses may focus on different language skills, each unit includes a range of open-ended activities that can be expanded in a variety of ways. Every reading passage is followed by a series of discussion questions, allowing students to practice stating their opinions about the topic in English. Each unit also includes an open-ended task that gives students a creative outlet to express their ideas about their own culture. Each task can be done in small groups or expanded to whole class

presentations. For teachers who prefer to focus on writing skills, the Teacher's Manual includes a sample topic sentence for the main theme of each unit that can be used as a springboard for paragraph or essay writing. By providing this range of language learning exercises, the goal was to create a resource in which every lesson has both a language learning and culture learning component.

## Conclusion

Although learning about foreign culture is an intrinsic part of language learning, the ability to describe one's own culture in the target language is of equal importance. Any person tends to take his or her own culture for granted and may not be aware of what truly makes each country culturally unique. Learning the viewpoints of non-Japanese with regards to Japanese culture can help Japanese students identify the unique points of their own culture. Furthermore, considering the growing global interest in Japanese culture, a strong awareness of their own culture is an important part of English proficiency for Japanese students. According to a report by the Agency of Cultural Exchange, Japan (2003), keeping up with an internationalizing world requires Japan to "strengthen its efforts to disseminate its culture" (p. 2) and requires "individual Japanese to be knowledgeable about the culture around them and to possess a desire to share it with others" (p. 40). One context in which to help Japanese achieve these goals starts in the English language classroom. Designing courses that more fully integrate language and culture is one way to improve not only language skills, but also intercultural competence. This paper has summarized just one possible framework for implementing such a course. However, further research is necessary in order to gauge the effectiveness of this resource as a tool for integrating language and culture teaching.

## Bio Data

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## Appendix

### Surprising Japan Table of Contents

1. 和菓子 v. 洋菓子: Are Japanese sweets healthier?
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