

THE DOUBLE EDGE OF CULTURAL AWARENESS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING



<https://doi.org/10.24412/2181-1784-2025-27-101-105>

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Abstract: This article examines the role of cultural awareness in foreign language classrooms and highlights potential issues arising from cultural representation in widely used Japanese language textbooks. Drawing on recent research on culture in language education, this paper argues that while cultural integration is essential for communicative competence, imbalanced or uncritical cultural depictions may reinforce stereotypes rather than cultivate intercultural competence. The impact of such cultural perspectives may be dealt with by learners both consciously and subconsciously. The analysis focuses on two issues: the tendency towards self-centered, ethnocentric portrayals, and the over-emphasis on cultural differences as opposed to underlying properties or universal human experiences. This article suggests that while cultural knowledge is crucial, materials must lead learners to critically engage with and tackle cultural barriers, moving beyond mere surface-level contrasts to foster genuine intercultural competence.

Keywords: cultural awareness, multicultural understanding, intercultural comprehension, holistic approach, foreign language teaching and learning.

Introduction

Contemporary higher education increasingly adopts a holistic pedagogical view that extends beyond mere knowledge and skill transmission relevant to language. In line with this, contemporary language classrooms are places not only for developing traditional four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) and vocabulary or communicative competence, but also for fostering learner autonomy, critical thinking, and intercultural sensitivity. As Wang and Luo (2019) note, language ability forms the foundation for meaning exploration, which in turn

promotes cultural understanding and higher-order thinking such as “logical, critical, and creative thinking aided by learning strategies” (p.119).

In particular, cultural aspects are considered indispensable in foreign language teaching and learning (Byram & Feng 2004, Cakir 2006, Hossain 2024, Ji & Shapii 2024). Without proper background knowledge of the target language's culture, learners may not be able to produce pragmatically meaningful expressions, even though they are fully capable of producing grammatically correct expressions fluently. However, the growing emphasis on cultural components carries risks. Teaching materials may inadvertently privilege certain cultural aspects, resulting in biased portrayals, or even result in discriminatory descriptions. This article explores such tendencies through case studies of widely used Japanese language textbooks, identifying potential shortcomings in their approaches to cultural representation.

This article builds partially on the author's previous work (Kitaoka, 2024). A generative AI tool (ChatGPT 5.0) was used solely for editing, while all substantive content was developed independently by the author.

Cultural awareness in foreign language classes

Cultural knowledge is widely regarded as indispensable to advanced language proficiency. Many linguistic features—such as the elaborate honorific systems of Japanese and Korean—are deeply embedded in cultural traditions shaped historically by Confucian values. In addition, language classrooms serve as important sites for cultivating diversity, inclusiveness, and empathy toward individuals who experience linguistic barriers. Truly, language classes put learners to experience how people with language barriers feel in daily life communication.

Language textbooks also emphasize these points. One of the goals of *Tobira: Gateway to Advanced Japanese Learning Through Content and Multimedia*, a well-known and widely-used Japanese textbook for upper intermediate learners, is “to expand their four language skills...and the **socio-cultural knowledge they need for communication**” (p. vii, my emphasis). Likewise, *Marugoto: Japanese Language and Culture, Intermediate 1 (B1)*, a Japanese language textbook edited by The Japan Foundation (government-funded organization to promote the Japanese culture and language), leads learners to learn “through topics that are interesting, while coming into contact with a **range of Japanese culture** that contains hints that help you **understand other cultures**” (p.23, my emphasis).

Nonetheless, cultural learning can pose challenges. For instance, teachers and learners may struggle with questions of whose culture is represented, how it is framed, and how to avoid stereotyping. Furthermore, educational materials may

privilege particular cultural perspectives. Crucially, such influences can be absorbed consciously or subconsciously. This article now examines two potential issues.

Potential issue 1: Self-centered

Some Japanese language textbooks strongly emphasize the superiority and/or uniqueness of Japanese cultural products. For instance, *Marugoto: Japanese Language and Culture, Intermediate 1 (B1)*—a textbook whose aims, as its title suggests, encompass cultural awareness and promotion—includes an exercise, where learners listen to a dialogue that compares various foods and dishes. According to the dialogue, Washoku, Japanese traditional cuisines, “uses seasonal ingredients skillfully, is served on a plate or in a bowl beautifully, and is healthy” (p. 61; my translation), while dishes from foreign cultures are described very briefly: e.g., “curry is appetizing,” or “Hamburgers, pizzas, or Chinese noodle fill the stomach well” (*ibid.*).

Thus, Japanese cuisines are presented in a positive and descriptive light, while descriptions of foreign food are depicted without similar detail. Such asymmetrical descriptions have potential risks of reinforcing ethnocentric value centering on Japan and Japanese cultural items. Namely, it seems that the textbook respects Washoku, while disrespecting foreign culinary culture.

This trend seems to have escalated since Washoku was registered in 2013 as UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage, and after soft power by cultural contents gained attention both politically and commercially. Such biased descriptions may lead learners to consciously question the neutrality or hospitality of the people in the culture depicted, or may subconsciously influence learner’s mentality towards it. Recently, it is reported (e.g., Harada 2022) that since language classes and materials might focus too much on the positive side of Japanese culture, foreign students often find a huge gap between actual life in Japan and what they learned in their home schools before coming to Japan.

Potential Issue 2: Emphasis on differences

The second issue is not confined to a specific textbook but can be found in various sources: an over-emphasis on cultural differences. It is fairly common for Japanese language textbooks to describe Japanese cultures, customs, and traditions, particularly when those are perceived as peculiar to Japan or strikingly different from other cultures. For instance, *Minna no Nihongo* (lit. Japanese for Everyone), undoubtedly the most well-known Japanese textbook, describes differences in greeting practices between Japan and the U.S., which creates an awkward moment.

While learning about differences can be a very first step toward mutual understanding, by itself it does not suffice. Rather, learning about differences can also be a very first step of discrimination or bullying. Surface-level contrasts between cultures — such as differing customs or etiquette — can lead learners to immerse themselves in cultural stereotypes rather than develop deeper multicultural understanding and intercultural competence. Intercultural learning, as a research domain, should aim to cultivate not only awareness of difference but also the skills and attitudes necessary for effective, respectful cross-cultural interaction.

Moreover, cultural aspects in foreign language classes often focus on surface culture, e.g., traditional arts and artifacts, food, clothes, manner and etiquette, etc. With simple introductions of these cultural items, learners are unlikely to cultivate intercultural skills or multicultural understanding, but merely likely to gain new knowledge on Japan.

Cakir (2006) argues that cultural awareness in foreign language learning further promotes critical thinking. Such higher-order thinking becomes possible when foreign language classes employ cultural aspects to enable learners to look into underlying properties—e.g., how and why speakers and listeners feel or behave in a certain way.

While learning about differences is often the very first step toward mutual understanding, it is not sufficient. Rather, noticing differences by itself can be the very first step of discrimination and/or bullying. If foreign language classes involve cultural aspects relevant to the language learned, it is desirable if foreign language classes lead learners to think how we should face and tackle cultural barriers, rather than just pointing out differences.

Concluding Remarks

It is widely thought that foreign language teaching can also involve learning cultural aspects and can promote cultural awareness. The cases introduced above indicate that cultural content must be handled with great care.

The current analysis, however, primarily focused on textual evaluation of a limited selection of widely used Japanese language textbooks, has several limitations. First, this study does not include empirical data on how students or teachers actually perceive and interact with the cultural content discussed, representing a key area for further investigation. Second, the scope is confined to Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) materials, and a broader comparative study across different target languages (e.g., Korean, Chinese, or European languages) could reveal whether the identified issues are localized or indicative of systemic pedagogical trends.

Future research should focus on empirical studies, such as learner surveys or classroom observations, to assess the actual impact of culturally-biased or difference-focused materials on students' intercultural competence development and motivation.

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