

(INTER)CULTURAL AWARENESS IN JAPANESE LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

(Inter)cultural awareness is a widely discussed concept in foreign language education, being considered one of the main pillars on which the process of language learning is based. Our paper's aim is to analyze the way in which (inter)cultural awareness is constructed in the main Japanese language textbooks used worldwide after the 1980s. We focus on the self-introduction sections in A1-level textbooks, identifying the main "foreigner" characters and examining their linguistic and cultural behavior in their interactions with the Japanese ones, as this is the first encounter of non-Japanese learners with the (inter)cultural construct in Japanese language study materials. We demonstrate that, at this level, we can speak of an advanced cultural awareness, but not of a genuine intercultural one.

Keywords: *cultural awareness, intercultural awareness, transcultural awareness, Japanese language education, Japanese textbooks, 'the other'*

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1. Introduction

The importance of integrating cultural elements in foreign language teaching needs little explanation, since language and culture are interwoven, and a high level of proficiency in a foreign language cannot be reached without having acquired a certain amount of knowledge about the corresponding culture.

The culture of a specific community or nation is reflected into and shapes the language spoken by its people. One of the most visible types of evidence at the verbal level is found in idiomatic expressions, which are often given as the best example of how a certain culture structures the reality and expresses it into a specific language. Although various counterparts can be found for many idiomatic expressions across languages, there are certain nuances that are always culture-specific. For example, as mentioned by Miles Neale (Neale, 2015: 86), for the Japanese proverb "Nen ni wa nen wo ireyo", the Japanese proverb dictionary *Shinmeikai koji kotowaza jiten* (2007) offers the "Look before you leap" English equivalent. However, as Neale demonstrates, the Japanese proverb, which can be literally translated as "let's put care into care", covers more general situations,

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while the English version focuses on rather individual-related cases. Moreover, although both proverbs contain imperative constructions, the English one focuses on an action with an individual effect, while the Japanese one focuses on a state, with a generalized effect (Neale, 2015: 93). Neale's findings are consistent with the view on the internal structure of the two languages proposed by the Japanese semiotician Yoshihiko Ikegami, who calls English "a DO-language", based on an active, agentive perspective, and Japanese "a BECOME-language", governed by a passive, non-agentive typological principle (Ikegami, 1981).

The integration of such elements into teaching and learning a foreign language is, therefore, of utmost importance, since no learner can fully comprehend a linguistic product in a certain language without being aware of the cultural realities and nuances behind it. Cultural awareness in teaching and learning foreign languages is by no means a new idea and the approaches to incorporating culture into language classes have changed over time, matching the dynamics of language learning. In ELT, for example, we witness a shift from a one-sided approach, focused on presenting an English-speaking world and culture to a world of non-English speakers, towards an approach in which the focus disperses, absorbing various individuals from various countries and cultures into an intercultural dialogue whose common language is English. There is vast research on how to include culture into language classes in ELT and on the importance of intercultural awareness and intercultural communication (see Baker, 2011; Byram, 2008; Peterson and Coltrane, 2003; Bennet et al., 2003 etc.). Peterson and Coltrane, for example, state that it is important "to help students understand that cultures are not monolithic." (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003: 2). However, when it comes to Japanese language education, the question of culture is generally linked solely to the Japanese culture and to how non-Japanese learners can understand it, with little reference to the cultural background of the non-Japanese learners. The research on intercultural communication in Japanese language classes is still rather limited.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to carry out our analysis, we use Will Baker's terminology and definitions regarding the matter of understanding cultures in intercultural communication (Baker, 2011, 2020). Although Baker's perspective focuses on English as a lingua franca, we find the concepts that he defines helpful for our analysis as well. Baker starts from the assumption that learning and using a language involves both "an understanding of grammar, vocabulary and phonology [...] and an understanding of the role of the sociocultural contexts." (Baker, 2011: 5). He distinguishes among a cultural approach, an intercultural approach and a transcultural approach to teaching languages.

Centered around cultural awareness, the cultural approach refers to a rather general level of understanding 'the other', focusing on one culture (in our case, the

Japanese one) and making wide use of cultural stereotypes. It is an essentialist perspective, where the awareness of ‘the other’ exists, but only as a vague, unspecific, unstructured reality. The main method through which this type of cultural awareness is achieved is the comparison between the culture of the learned language with other cultures, starting from one particular situation and then generalizing the situation-bounded behavior to a larger group of people or communities. An advanced level of cultural awareness involves ideas such as the “fluid, dynamic and relative nature of any cultural characterization and understanding” (Baker, 2011: 12), as well as the ability of the participants in communication to predict possible mistakes or misunderstandings that might arise from cultural differences.

In the intercultural approach, the borders between distinct cultures are blurred and we witness a greater degree of flexibility and adaptation. The key word is now “interaction”, since the intercultural awareness arises during interactions among individuals with different cultural backgrounds (Scollon&Scollon, 2001). The participants to interaction are able “to negotiate and mediate between different emerging and contextually grounded communication modes and frames of reference” (Baker, 2011: 13). Intercultural awareness works at a level where the distinction between two different cultures is replaced by a perspective where culture is not linked to a certain native speaker community and the lingua franca (English, in Baker’s analysis) is “used to express and enact cultural practices and forms that are related to a range of communities, moving between the local and the global in dynamic ways that often result in novel, emergent practices and forms” (Baker, 2011: 14). The attitude of the participants in this case is a flexible one, with no pre-defined framework of, or expectations from, the communication situation, the focus being rather on observing what happens and adapting to it (Baker, 2020: 3).

Finally, the transcultural approach focuses on the manner in which “cultural references, practices and identities are constructed and negotiated in interaction” (Baker, 2020: 3). The ‘inter’ component from “intercultural” disappears, since the participants no longer move between cultures, but rather “through and across cultural and linguistic boundaries and in the process transcend those boundaries” (Baker, 2020: 3).

Baker’s distinctions are a useful framework for our analysis, allowing us to clearly understand whether the issue of cultural, intercultural or transcultural awareness is present in Japanese language textbooks and how this awareness is being constructed.

3. Aim and Methodology

My paper aims at presenting and analyzing the way in which characters representing cultures other than the Japanese one are introduced in the main Japanese language textbooks used worldwide, in an attempt to understand whether we can speak about a shift from a purely cultural representation to an intercultural one. For this purpose, I refer to the main textbooks and websites used for teaching Japanese worldwide at elementary level (A1), as follows: *Nihongo shoho* (1981), *Minna no nihongo* (1998), *Genki* (2000), *Erin ga chōsen! Nihongo dekimasu / Erin's challenge. I can speak Japanese!* (2007), *Marugoto* (2013), *Irodori* (2020). In the said textbooks, I focus on the sections including self-introductions, where we find an explicit image of the foreigners with whom the Japanese characters interact.

4. Japanese Language Education Worldwide – A Short Overview

Compared to the languages of Europe, Japanese language education has a rather short history. As indicated by K. Masuyama, between the 16th century – when Japan starts its commercial relations with Portugal – and the 19th century, when the Meiji Restoration reopens Japan's gates to the world, we cannot talk about Japanese language education as a coherent system, the cases of people who were studying Japanese being very few and often circumstantial. There are some dictionaries of the Japanese language made by the Jesuit missionaries in Japan, as well as documents on Japanese language learning that were published in China (starting with the 16th century), Russia (starting with the 18th century) and, in the 19th century, scholars in many European countries such as Holland, Germany, France, Finland, England or Belgium publish materials on Japanese language learning. After the end of the 19th century until the end of World War II, we witness the implementation of a colonial educational policy in Asian countries that makes Japanese language instruction compulsory in the area, but it is only after World War II that Japanese starts being studied abroad with the aim of mutual understanding and communication (Masuyama, 2002).

However, it is only after the Japanese economic bubble of the 1980s that the Japanese language starts gaining popularity and begins to be studied all over the world. Consequently, the development of Japanese language materials also undergoes a significant increase, with more and more textbooks being published both in Japan and abroad. The establishment of The Japan Foundation (JF) in 1972 led to the creation of an institutional framework within which Japanese language education continued to develop and improve, especially after the opening of the two Japanese Language Institutes in Urawa (1989) and Osaka (1997), where training programs for Japanese language teachers have been implemented and Japanese language materials have been continuously created. After 2000, and especially in the second decade of the 21st century, due to the wide spread of popular culture products such as *manga* and *anime* via the internet, Japanese has

become more and more popular, being now studied all over the world. According to the results of the latest report on “Survey on Japanese-Language Education Abroad” conducted by JF in 2018, Japanese is studied in 134 countries and the number of learners reaches more than 3,850,000 people (Japan Foundation, 2020: 7). Since 1979, “the number of implementing countries and regions has increased 2.0 times, the number of institutions has increased 16.3 times, the number of teachers has increased 18.9 times, and the number of learners has increased 30.3 times” states the report (Japan Foundation, 2020: 8), which illustrates the considerable increase in popularity of Japanese language studies.

5. Awareness of ‘The Other’

Given the importance, relevance and popularity of the educational materials created by the Japan Foundation as the representative institution for Japanese language education abroad, we focus our analysis on textbooks published by JF, but we will also refer to two textbooks – *Minna no nihongo* and *Genki* – published by commercial publishing houses, as they have been used by a considerable number of learners all over the world.

5.1 *Nihongo shoho* (1981)

The first textbook that we are looking into is *Nihongo shoho* (‘First steps in Japanese’), published in 1981 by JF. The section dedicated to self-introductions is included in the first lesson. The title reads “I am Japanese” and there is a short dialogue between a Japanese and an American, as follows:

Hello, I’m John Smith. Nice to meet you.

Are you (Mr.) John?

Yes, I am John.

Are you a student?

Yes, I’m a student.

Are you French?

No, I’m not French. I’m American.



Both the verbal and the non-verbal message transmitted through the illustration in the book are highly stereotypical as concerns the foreigner. The generic name – John Smith – and the nationality – American – only speak about the stereotypical image of the foreigner in Japan. He must be American, blonde-haired and slightly

dominating in his body language, as he appears in the illustration. There is no attempt in *Nihongo shoho* to create a more diverse image of the foreigner. Since the end of World War II, the USA has been the country for which the Japanese have shown both fascination and resentment, and it is not surprising at all that the American was the representative image of the foreigner in the first major textbook of Japanese to be used throughout the world. Other countries that appear in the unit containing the self-introduction part are Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, all belonging to South-East Asia, the major market for the Japanese language education at the time.

5.2 *Minna no nihongo* (1998)

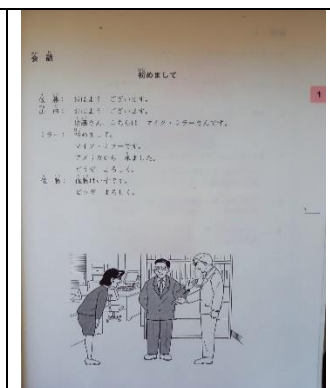
Almost two decades later, in 1998, we witness the publication of *Minna no nihongo* ('Everybody's Japanese'), a textbook that follows and completes *Shin nihongo no kiso* (1990), a previous rather technical coursebook designed mainly for students in engineering. In *Minna no nihongo*, the main character is the American Mike Miller. However, this time the palette of countries and nationalities accompanying Miller in the unit dedicated to self-introductions is larger, including characters from China, South Korea, India, Thailand, UK, Germany and Brazil. We witness an expansion of Japan's interests from America and South-East Asia to Europe and South America, as the number of Japanese language learners in certain countries from these areas – such as Germany, UK or Brazil – was high enough at the time to be included in a Top 10 of countries with the highest numbers of Japanese language students (Japan Foundation, 1998: 7). The first encounter of the learner with Mike Miller and his interlocutors is as follows:

Satō: Good morning.

Yamada: Good morning, Mrs. Satō, this is Mr. Miller.

Miller: Hello. I'm Mike Miller. I come from America. Nice to meet you.

Satō: I'm Satō Keiko. Nice to meet you.



The approach is again highly based on stereotypes, the persons taking part in the conversation exchanging basic set-phrases that are used when introducing oneself. The illustration in the book emphasizes even more the cultural stereotypes: the dark-haired Japanese woman is taking a polite bow, according to the Japanese custom, before the blonde-haired American man, who is extending his hand for a handshake, a typical gesture in Western cultures. The way in which the two

characters say their names is also a reflection of the two different cultures: the Japanese uses her family name first, while the American uses his first name. However, the dialogue does not include any explicit reference to this cultural difference.

5.3 *Genki* (2000)

After the year 2000, we witness a boom in the development of teaching and learning resources, doubled by the spread and greater accessibility of the internet, and the Japanese language materials start including more and more culturally diverse characters.

In 2000, The Japan Times publishes *Genki*, an integrated textbook addressed mainly to university students. The main characters are Mary (an international student from the University of Arizona) and Takeshi (a Japanese student). Still largely revolving around cultural stereotypes, *Genki* is the first integrated textbook used worldwide that introduces a female character as the main foreigner figure. The representative foreign nationality is still American, but the inclusion of female foreigner characters will become a common fact after 2000.

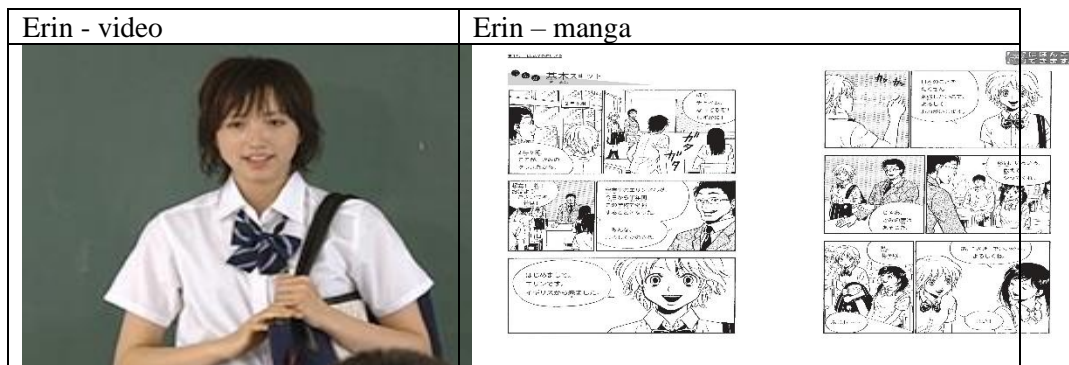
5.4 *Erin's challenge. I can speak Japanese!* (2007)

The publication of *Erin's challenge. I can speak Japanese!* in 2007 by JF marks a turning point in the way in which the Japanese characters and the foreigner characters interact in the self-introduction section of textbooks. The print textbook was originally accompanied by DVDs containing a series of videos about Erin's experiences in Japan, and later, a website including all the content of the textbooks and DVDs, plus some additional materials, was launched. *Erin's challenge* is the first learning material that explicitly states "Understanding culture" as one of its purposes:

You can get more information about Japanese culture while watching the different videos. And while doing this, please think about the differences and similarities with your own culture. This will help put both Japanese culture and your own culture in perspective; it is important to realize that there are many kinds of cultures in the world. (<https://www.erin.jpf.go.jp/en/about>)

Let us first notice that the very title of the textbook comes in two versions – Japanese (エリンが挑戦！日本語出来ます) and English (*Erin's challenge. I can speak Japanese!*). Erin is a British exchange student who goes to Japan to spend one year in a Japanese high-school and the actress who plays Erin's role, Ellie Toyota, is actually half-British and half-Japanese. It is interesting to notice that in the videos, Erin looks more like a Japanese school girl, while in the manga version of the textbook, she is portrayed as a typical foreigner: big eyes, blonde hair. The

very person of the main character embodying the foreigner becomes thus a blend of cultures.




Source of photos: <https://www.erin.jpf.go.jp/en/>

In *Erin's challenge*, although in the section on self-introductions there is only one foreigner (British), the impact that she has on the learner is much greater than in any of the previous materials. That is due to several factors, among which we can enumerate the influence of the video material and the way in which the foreign learner can identify himself/herself with the foreign exchange student in Japan and her experiences there. It is true that cultural stereotypes are still being used, but the interactions are much more natural, both verbally and non-verbally. The characters' attitude and behavior are very similar to real-life interactions and the whole construct shows a clearer understanding of the role of cultural awareness in language learning.

5.5 Marugoto (2013)

Until the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, the great majority of textbooks used throughout the world had students as their target learners. In 2013, a new textbook was launched by JF, this time being addressed to adult learners who are not necessarily enrolled in an academic institution: *Marugoto* ('Whole'). Based on JF Standards for Japanese Language Education – a system that largely parallels the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, *Marugoto* states as one of its objectives “an emphasis on using Japanese to communicate, and on understanding and respecting other cultures” (Marugoto, 2013: 3). The expectation thus created, that the new textbook was designed based on an (inter)cultural approach, is actually confirmed from the very first lessons. The section that makes the object of our analysis offers the foreign learner a situation of communication that is very close to what usually happens in Japan to adult foreigners who go to the country either for work or for study: an international party and an informal gathering of both foreigners and Japanese. The dialogues are designed to be studied as a listening comprehension activity and they introduce

foreign characters from China, South Korea, Germany, Australia and Egypt. We will illustrate them with one conversation that includes some culture-specific customs which emphasize the differences between Japan and other countries and cultures:

<p>I'm Joy Carter. Nice to meet you.</p> <p>Joy Carter, right. (Is it) Ms. Joy? (Is it) Ms. Carter?</p> <p>Please call me "Joy". I'm sorry, what's your name?</p> <p>I'm Tanaka Shin'ichi. Please call me "Tanaka".</p>	
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Cultural affiliation is marked visually both in the illustrations and photos – the participants at the party being dressed in national costumes – and in the verbal interactions, as exemplified above. The learners are made aware of the different ways of calling people in different cultures – by using first names or last names. Possible misunderstandings arising from a lack of cultural awareness are thus avoided.

5.6 Irodori (2020)

Irodori ('To color'), a textbook available exclusively online, was launched in 2020, followed by the launch of a dedicated free online course, in 2021. Being connected to *Marugoto*, with which it can be used together, as stated in the "About" section of the website, *Irodori* is addressed to foreign people who need basic Japanese communication skills for daily life and working in Japan and it "aims for mutual understanding between people through communication and an understanding of culture" (<https://www.irodori.jpf.go.jp/en/about.html>). The self-introduction section of the *Starter* volume (A1) uses the same setting as *Marugoto*, an international party, where the foreigner interlocutors of the Japanese character come from Vietnam and Cambodia. The dialogue, however, does not include cultural references, being centered mainly on the names and the countries of the characters.

5.7 JF Japanese e-learning Minato

The spread of the internet that started to gain speed especially after the year 2000 led to the development of electronic learning materials for Japanese as well. We will only briefly refer here to the *JF Japanese e-learning Minato* ('Harbor') platform created by JF, where the learner has the possibility to enroll in several courses, both related to language and to culture. The courses make use of either existing textbooks (such as *Marugoto* or *Hirogaru Nihongo* – a topic-based website designed by JF, containing materials mainly for self-study) or other material, but the sections relevant to our analysis are the ones called "Community" and "Group Noticeboard". "Community" is a place where learners can gather to talk about a certain pre-defined topic (such as Food, Entertainment, Travel etc.), while the "Group Noticeboard" is designed to be used by the learners enrolled in a specific course in order to exchange ideas and to have conversations on topics related to the course. The platform's potential to become a place where learners belonging to different cultures can engage in a truly intercultural dialogue while using Japanese as their common language is considerable, but the number of people actually accessing it is rather small, thus diminishing the expected results.

6. Conclusions

In our paper, we looked at the self-introduction section from A1 level Japanese language textbooks used worldwide, in an attempt to understand how (inter)cultural awareness is constructed in the interactions between the Japanese and the 'foreigner' characters that appear in said lessons. We identified the main nationalities that are used, as well as the general approach in presenting them.

A chronological perspective shows that in the beginning, the favored approach was the cultural one, understood in Baker's terms. It made use of cultural stereotypes and reduced the cultures to a set of fixed gestures, behaviors and attitudes, the representative foreign character being the American. *Erin's challenge* (2007) marks the shift from a basic cultural awareness approach to an advanced cultural awareness approach, where although two cultures are set in contrast with each other, the cultural interactions between their representative characters become more fluid and dynamic, largely due to the videos incorporated in the learning material. Later, together with the change in the target learners – from high-school or university students to adult persons working or studying in Japan – the nature of the interactions also changed, moving clearly from a basic cultural awareness to an advanced cultural awareness and even incorporating elements of an intercultural approach, such as a soft blurring of the borders between different cultures, as well as flexibility and adaptation, as seen mainly in the "Community" and "Group Noticeboard" of the *Minato* platform, for example. A transcultural approach is, however, difficult to implement in a controlled environment such as a learning space, especially at the A1 level that our paper has focused on.

The nationalities selected for the first encounters of the foreign learner with the Japanese language are also representative for the way in which the Japanese see the creation of a cultural or intercultural awareness. Looking at the countries that appear in the sections under analysis, we notice that in the beginning, the main foreign characters were American, while beginning with the 2000s, the range of countries and nationalities increases and gets more diverse, reflecting the spread and development of Japanese language education throughout the world. “East Asia and Southeast Asia continue to account for high percentages of the institutions, teachers, and learners” reads the 2018 Report by JF (Japan Foundation, 2020: 10), so it is no wonder that a considerable number of characters for foreigners come from countries in the respective area (China, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia etc.). The increase in the number of learners from Middle East and Africa (Japan Foundation, 2020: 18) is reflected in the appearance of new characters such as Muhammad from Egypt, in *Marugoto*, for example. Thus, the selection of the nationalities that are included in Japanese language materials does not appear to be random, but closely connected to the dynamics of Japanese language education around the globe.

The findings of our study have to be seen in light of some limitations that are concerned mainly with the elementary level of the material, which does not allow for a fully intercultural or transcultural approach. Furthermore, we focused only on the self-introduction section of the textbooks, where a large number of set phrases are used, which makes it difficult to introduce some more complex content. A further study on other sections of the textbooks – such as the reading or listening ones, as well as on more advanced levels, would definitely enrich and improve our research.

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