

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

## Cross-cultural understanding in the Japanese EFL classroom: Beyond *natto*

John Rucynski, Jr.  
*Doshisha University*

### Reference data:

Rucynski, Jr., J. (2008). Cross-cultural understanding in the Japanese EFL classroom: Beyond *natto*. In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

It has long been argued that teaching culture is an integral part of teaching language. Despite the importance of teaching cross-cultural understanding in the EFL classroom, this is much easier said than done. There are a variety of obstacles any teacher faces when trying to integrate culture and language teaching. This article describes some of these obstacles and, more importantly, introduces classroom-tested materials and techniques for making cross-cultural understanding a stronger component of EFL classes in Japan.

私達は言語を教えると同時に、文化についても教える必要があります。しかし英語の授業で、文化の交流を意識して教えることは難しいことでもあります。EFL(外国語としての英語)の授業で、様々な文化の相違点を教えるために最も重要なことは、良い教材を提供し、高い知識をもって生徒に教える手法である。

It has been argued that it takes more than just linguistic competence to be proficient in a foreign language (Krasner, 1999). In addition to grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, every EFL class also needs a substantial cross-cultural component. Indeed, Byram and Risager (1999, p. 58) have referred to the language teacher's role as "a professional mediator between learners and foreign languages and culture." Despite the common acceptance of this role, putting a strong emphasis on cross-cultural understanding in our EFL classrooms is a task with a range of obstacles and dangers. This article will summarize the issues we face and present a variety of solutions for fulfilling our role as teachers of both language and culture.

### Importance of cross-cultural understanding

#### *Student needs*

In my university English classes in Japan, students fill out a needs analysis during the first class which includes the question "Why do you want to study English?" The most common response, by a significantly large margin, has always been that students learn English because they wish to communicate with people

from different cultures. In order to both motivate students and help them to reach this goal, it is obviously important to incorporate as much cross-cultural content into the curriculum as possible.

### ***Internationalization***

Rapid internationalization is upon us and will have an obvious effect on Japan as well. With the necessity for foreign labor in Japan in the coming years, it is more and more likely that Japanese will live in a world where they interact with non-Japanese people on a daily basis. Although non-Japanese should do their best to quickly assimilate to life in Japan, it will be a smoother progression if Japanese are also more aware of the different cultural mores and behaviors of non-Japanese.

### ***Relationship between language and culture***

It has long been argued that we cannot teach language without also teaching culture. A few simple examples will show how important an understanding of foreign cultures is when learning English. Surely most foreigners living in Japan have had the experience of a Japanese person asking “How old are you?” within the first minute of a conversation. Although the intention is not bad, we have an instant culture clash, as it is obviously considered inappropriate to ask this question so quickly. Some teachers may argue that Japanese are just practicing the English they do know, but the lesson here is that teaching our learners to ask “How old are you?” also entails teaching them when it is appropriate to use this English. Again, “How old are you?” might be correct language, but inappropriate usage.

Also consider the simple case of the handshake when saying “Nice to meet you.” Since the handshake is a relatively recent custom in Japan, some Japanese may not be aware of the importance of a strong, firm handshake. A Japanese doing business in the U.S., for example, will not make a good first impression if they greet with a “dead fish,” or weak handshake. Therefore, being an effective learner of English means not only being able to say “Nice to meet you,” but also learning what cultural behavior goes with the greeting.

Finally, when students try to translate Japanese into English they frequently realize that there are certain phrases which cannot be literally translated. Consider the Japanese expression “*Osaki ni shitsurei shimasu*,” which Japanese workers say when leaving the office before others. While a typical Japanese worker will use this phrase almost every time they leave the office, it is hard to imagine an American worker, for example, uttering “Excuse me for leaving before you all” every night before heading home.

### **Difficulties and dangers of teaching cross-cultural understanding**

Despite the obvious need to incorporate a strong element of cross-cultural understanding into our EFL classes, there are several difficulties and dangers that make this a challenging task. It is important to give an overview of these issues before moving onto suggestions for appropriate materials and activities.

## Difficulties

### Teaching materials

Generally speaking, cross-cultural understanding is not covered sufficiently in EFL course books. Although many course books do make an effort to include excerpts or even a whole unit devoted to cultural differences, this can often do more harm than good. Whereas obviously the intention for including cross-cultural material is to spread awareness, the reality is that “statements that begin with ‘Germans are like this...’ or ‘Americans are like that...’ are implicit in textbook presentations” (Fischer, 1998, p. 49). Kilickaya (2004) has further argued against this generalizing of cultures. Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to supplement these overly simplistic course book introductions of cross-cultural content.

Since cross-cultural understanding is not sufficiently covered in course books, finding proper materials is a challenge for any EFL teacher. This topic is obviously covered more thoroughly in academic texts, but these are not suitable materials for a communicative-based EFL class for learners with limited English skills. So, if you want to make cross-cultural awareness a consistent theme of your classes, it is necessary to build up a wealth of supplementary materials. Ideas for alternative materials will be explored later in this article.

### Curriculum

Strict curriculum guidelines can also limit our opportunities to teach cross-cultural issues in the classroom. If we are teaching in an environment with a strict curriculum, it may

be a challenge to focus on cross-cultural issues as much as we like. The point of culture might be relegated to a five-minute explanation of a cultural issue at the end of class. Fortunately, with a creative approach, cross-cultural understanding can easily be integrated into the most rigid of curriculums.

### Dangers

Although teachers obviously mean well when incorporating cross-cultural content into their lessons, it is easy to do more harm than good, as with course book presentations which generalize rather than broaden minds.

### Reinforcing stereotypes

One would hope that one goal of any EFL teacher is to help students dispel stereotypes. Without proper preparation or materials, however, it is easy to make the mistake of instead reinforcing stereotypes. For example, a popular DVD among English teachers in recent years has been *Supersize Me*, a documentary which examines fast food and the obesity issue in the United States. Although this is a fascinating documentary, it gives some very strong images that leave students with the impression that everyone in the U.S. is overweight and constantly eats fast food.

### Culture is too broad

It is difficult to avoid generalizing when dealing with such a broad topic as culture or cultural differences. For example, the course book *Passages* (Richards & Sandy, 1998) has

an activity called “The Average American.” Is it possible to construct an image of a typical person for a multicultural society of 300 million people? Although the authors presumably just put the exercise in as a launching pad for finding out more about the U.S., it is again indicative of the limitations of course books when dealing with culture. For a teacher without the time to properly expand on the exercise, it again does more harm than good. This is further evidence that it is of questionable value to introduce the issue of cross-cultural understanding unless we are able to make it an ongoing component of our classes.

### *Student language level*

We have to remember that we are teaching students whose native language is not English. When you consider all the misunderstandings about culture that occur even between people who speak the same language, you can see that the issue of cultural differences is something that needs to be delicately taught. All the concept-checking in the world still does not guarantee that every student in your class completely understands the point you are trying to make about a cultural difference.

### **Solutions**

I would now like to describe some activities and materials I have used in EFL classes in Japan to explore the issue of cultural differences.

### *A framework for teaching cross-cultural content*

Before discussing particular materials and activities, it is necessary to state my objective when calling for a component of cross-cultural understanding in the EFL class. Banks (2002) suggests a four-level approach to integrating multicultural content into the American education system, and this model is equally relevant to the EFL context.

Level 1, the Contributions approach, is the weakest and just refers to adding a small amount of content to the normal curriculum. It is akin to the busy EFL teacher who throws in a Halloween activity to fill time at the end of October. Do students really learn anything about modern American culture by doing a Halloween crossword puzzle?

Level 2, the Additive approach, is somewhat stronger, but also just refers to, for example, including a unit on minority groups. In an EFL context, this is similar to a course book which has a single unit on cultural differences. Again, this is a step in the right direction, but of limited use.

Level 3, the Transformational approach, and Level 4, the Social Action approach, are what EFL teachers should be aiming for. The Transformational approach revises the entire curriculum so that multiple viewpoints are considered, while the Social Action approach involves the students questioning issues they learn about and taking actions to solve them. Although Level 4 can be somewhat hard to imagine in our EFL context, we must consider that taking the action of learning a new language and using that to communicate with someone from a different culture is, in a way, a form of social action.

### *Materials and teaching suggestions*

Considering the shortcomings of EFL course books when it comes to teaching cross-cultural understanding, this article will focus on supplementary/alternative materials and activities that have worked well in engaging students in cross-cultural issues in EFL classes in Japan.

### *Case studies*

Although course books can make a passing reference to cultural differences, what is often missing is focus on actual case studies about cross-cultural issues. Since most EFL course books are targeted at students from more than one country, it is rare to find cases that relate directly to Japan. For this reason, a favorite case study of mine to explore is the public bath discrimination case which occurred in Otaru in the late 1990s. In this case, an American resident (and later Japanese citizen) of Sapporo brought a lawsuit against a public bath and the city of Otaru for having a “Japanese only” policy. This policy was put in place after visiting non-Japanese sailors did not follow Japanese etiquette when visiting the bath, which drove away Japanese customers.

What is important about this case is that it shows how basic cultural differences can lead to much more serious issues of prejudice and discrimination. Teaching about cultural differences means more than teaching about light topics such as Americans like to shower in the morning but Japanese like to bathe before bed.

The way I like to introduce this case is by having the students try to explain in English how to behave at the public bath (Appendix 1). Countless course book demonstrations

teach students the language to explain a process, but usually involving overly simple or contrived tasks. Granted, teaching a foreigner how to use the public bath is not an everyday situation, but when we integrate the language behind explaining a process with the language behind explaining an important part of Japanese culture, we are on the road to the aforementioned social action approach. Japan can be an incredibly complicated place for non-Japanese, so the ability to explain Japanese customs is an invaluable skill for students who wish to communicate with people from different cultures.

After completing the task of explaining the steps of taking a bath, I introduce the case to the students, through either a listening or a reading activity (Appendix 2). Following this, you can expand on the case in a number of ways, depending on the level of the students and the skill focus of the class. Since there is the timely issue of Japan adopting the jury system in the future, holding a mock trial is an interesting classroom activity you can try.

Such a case, however, is also very teachable in writing classes, where you can integrate it with such skills as paraphrasing (after researching different opinions about the case) or process (the proper way to use the public bath) or argumentative essay writing (choosing a side of the case to argue for). This shows that with a little creativity the issue of cross-cultural understanding can be integrated into any curriculum.

### *Movies*

Movies have long been a favorite form of supplementary material for EFL teachers, and fortunately there are

obviously a variety of films which deal with the issue of cross-cultural understanding. One of the most relevant films for EFL teachers in Japan is the 1992 movie *Mr. Baseball*, which stars Tom Selleck (Jack Elliot) as an aging Major League Baseball star who comes to Japan to play for the Chunichi Dragons. Although the theme of cultural differences is a central theme of the whole movie, the treasure trove for the EFL teacher is scenes 3 and 4 (DVD), from when Elliot arrives in Japan to his first day of practice with the team. The segment abounds with examples of cultural differences Elliot faces, from simple mistakes like not taking off his shoes, to the more advanced issue of trying to explain to the team that he has his own training techniques. The visual reinforcement makes the scene appropriate for different levels of students.

As with other mentioned resources, *Mr. Baseball* can also be exploited in various ways. In addition to the cross-cultural discussion that ensues, I have also used it to teach a lesson on mixed conditionals (Appendix 3). Elliot was very ignorant of Japan before arriving, so after the students write down the mistakes he makes, they can also be asked to construct longer sentences to fit the pattern, “If Jack had known more about Japan, he would have taken off his shoes before entering the locker room” or “If Jack had prepared better for his move, he would have brought business cards to Japan.” As examples for introducing the grammatical form, I also include mistakes I have personally made in Japan, which the students always enjoy!

As with other resources as well, this movie comes with a warning. Jack does not want to come to Japan at the beginning, so out of context he appears to be an arrogant

American who looks down on his new country. You will need to explain to the students that the plot is constructed this way in order to make it a typical Hollywood movie about overcoming obstacles. In the end, Jack learns to accept the Japanese way and his teammates also accept some of his American ways. Although the movie concludes with a positive message about the bridging of different cultures, it is also a comedy, and when you have comedy you more often than not have stereotypes. So, you have a choice between using the film to highlight cultural differences and using it to look into the issue of stereotypes. Of course both are equally valid.

### *Video interviews*

In addition to movies, a good way to supplement the classroom with cross-cultural activities is making your own video interviews. All it takes is a decent video camera and some willing non-Japanese subjects. Our students here in Japan often complain of the limited opportunities they have to speak with non-Japanese people. Considering this, they don’t get enough chances to hear non-Japanese voices discussing their life in Japan. While a course book CD might, for example, have an American talking about the cultural differences he faced in Spain, it is rare for students to hear someone talking about their own world – life in Japan.

Because of this lack of opportunity, I often interview my non-Japanese colleagues or friends so that students can get a deeper insight into views of their own culture. Even simple questions like “What do you like/dislike about life in Japan?” can lead to interesting points about cultural differences. For

example, our students might take for granted things like a convenience store having hot water available to prepare their instant noodles on the spot. They are often surprised when one of my interviewees remarks that what they love about Japan is this convenience and attention to detail.

Although it might sound negative to ask non-Japanese what they dislike about Japan, it is equally necessary, in order to go more deeply into the topic of cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, it is quite easy to turn a negative into a positive. For example, one of my interviewees thought that Japanese drivers were thoughtless because she often saw cars not pulling over for ambulances. She was shocked at such a custom. When she spoke face to face with my students, however, they explained that because of the narrowness of roads here, it is sometimes impossible to find space to pull over. By opening the lines of communication, my Japanese students were able to change a negative image one of my exchange students had about life in Japan.

Again, if your students have only limited chances to converse with non-Japanese, you can help them by making your own videos and listening activities. At the same time, you can focus these videos on the all-important issues of cultural differences and the resulting cross-cultural understanding. Another technique is to collect questions from the students on the topics they want to ask non-Japanese. This further gives them the practice to get beyond the “Can you eat natto?” phase and have a greater variety of topics to discuss when they communicate with non-Japanese.

### *E-pals*

The good old-fashioned international pen pal is becoming a thing of the past, but fortunately email exchange is a new and improved system. Another way to both give your students more opportunities to communicate with non-Japanese and to delve more deeply into the issue of cross-cultural understanding is to set up an email exchange project.

There are two ways to go about such a project. One is to use an internet service such as epals.com, which can arrange email exchanges between classes around the globe. Another option is to arrange email partners using your own contacts. With the growing interest in Japanese culture in the west, it is getting easier and easier to find willing participants.

For my project, I focused on expanding on the aforementioned “Average American” lesson from *Passages*. Frustrated by what was missing from this lesson, I instructed my students to choose a topic (e.g. education, fashion, food and health, etc.) and write sentences describing their image of the “typical” American. They then had to email their respective American e-pal and ask them to respond to these images. It was a productive project, as part of cross-cultural understanding is constantly testing your images as you try to understand a foreign culture. In their evaluation of the project, my students responded not only that the exchange changed their image of American culture, but that it also gave them a more positive image.

### *Magazines and newspapers*

Magazines are a great resource for any EFL instructor but, as with most authentic materials, many magazine articles

will be too advanced for a majority of our students. A good resource for the English teacher in Japan, however, is the *Hiragana Times*. In addition to feature-length articles, this bilingual magazine also has shorter pieces which are especially useful in the context of teaching about cultural differences. Each month, the magazine interviews two non-Japanese about their likes and dislikes about living in Japan. Most of the entries are just a few sentences long, but sharing a variety of remarks with your class can make for interesting discussion. Again, talking about dislikes does have potential for causing problems, but it is also the dislikes which my Japanese students find much more interesting. It is usually through what we negatively react to that we can find truer and deeper cultural differences and learn to understand and respect different perspectives. Another good point of this column is that it doesn't just focus on westerners, but gathers comments from a wide range of non-Japanese.

### Cartoons

One final unique resource that needs special mention is the delightful book entitled *Gaijin*, by cartoonist Tim Ernst. Although first published in 1987, a majority of the cultural differences are still relevant today. The format of the book is simply a series of single-panel comics which highlight cultural differences non-Japanese often face living in Japan. The situations depicted range from the simple daily differences (e.g. vending machines in Japan as opposed to other countries) to those that might cause more distress for foreigners in Japan (e.g. hesitancy among Japanese to sit next to them on the train).

Although this book is merely a collection of single-panel comics, it can be used in the classroom in a variety of ways. Since there are so many examples in the book, they are an excellent time-filler to have on hand throughout the semester if you want to consistently give your students an insight into differences non-Japanese feel living here. Many of the situations will be new or surprising to your students, so it is also useful to give them a handout with sentence starters, such as “Compared to vending machines in western countries, Japanese vending machines have...” Such a worksheet can be used to give the students hints and also to work on constructions such as comparing and contrasting. For more advanced students or a writing class, the comics can also be used as a brainstorming basis for writing paragraphs or even full essays on cultural differences.

By constantly using even simple resources like these, our students can get more and more background knowledge on what differences non-Japanese face in their country. Again, this gives them more topics to talk about when they have real communication with non-Japanese than the aforementioned *natto* topic.

### Conclusion

Although there is the obvious need to integrate language learning with cross-cultural understanding, it is an extremely complicated task. It becomes even more complicated in a country like Japan where our students still have only limited opportunities to communicate with non-Japanese. In addition to the aforementioned supplementary materials and activities, there are several points to keep in mind when attempting to be a teacher of both language and culture.



### ***Make cross-cultural understanding an ongoing component of the curriculum***

Keep in mind that our goal is to do more than just give the occasional lesson about holidays and strive to be closer to the Transformational or Social Action approaches in the Banks model. As you can see from some of the suggestions in this article, with a little creativity, cross-cultural content can be incorporated into virtually any curriculum. Just because you may be asked to teach your students grammar doesn't mean you can't integrate that with information about other cultures.

### ***Always present multiple perspectives***

As noted, one drawback is that the limited space EFL course books have to introduce cross-cultural content makes it inevitable that they will give a generalized view of different cultures. Additionally, showing just one clip from, for example, *Supersize Me*, gives the impression that all Americans eat fast food constantly and all are overweight. While it can't be denied that countries like the U.S. struggle with obesity, it is also important to show the other side of this. For example, you could share an article about the Japanese food boom in the U.S. or the large number of vegetarians in the west. Furthermore, you could interview (or have your students interview) a group of westerners about their eating habits and you will more than likely find that their habits are much different from what is described in the documentary. Although this deals with a lighter topic such as eating habits, it is an important reminder that giving only one perspective can easily lead to reinforcing stereotypes,

while giving multiple perspectives usually leads to dispelling stereotypes.

### ***Be more than just a language teacher***

Although the role suggested by Byram and Risager at the beginning of this article can be a complicated task, there are solutions to the obstacles we face when trying to be mediators between our learners and foreign languages and culture. Accumulating appropriate and engaging materials can be time-consuming, but it is also a necessity.

**John Rucynski, Jr.** has taught EFL/ESL in the U.S., Japan, Morocco, and New Zealand. He currently teaches in the Institute for Language and Culture at Doshisha University.

### **References**

- Banks, J. (2002). *Introduction to multicultural education* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Byram, M. & Risager, K. (1999). *Language teachers, politics, and cultures*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Fischer, G. (1998). *E-mail in foreign language teaching*. Stauffenburg: Medien.
- Kilickaya, F. (2004). Guidelines to evaluate cultural content in textbooks. *The Internet TESL Journal*, X (12).
- Krasner, I. (1999). The role of culture in language teaching. *Dialogue on Language Instruction*, 13(1-2), 79-88.
- Richards, J. C. & Sandy, C. (1998). *Passages, student book 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Appendix 1. Public bath explanation lesson

#### Public bath confusion

Read the following e-mail from your foreign friend and try to help him.

*Dear Junko:*

*Hey, sorry I haven't written in a while. Hope everything has been fine with you. I need your help! This weekend, my Japanese host mother is taking me to the public bath. The problem is that I don't know what to do when I get there! I know that everyone takes a bath together, but I don't know the proper etiquette. Since my host mother doesn't speak much English and I don't speak much Japanese, it's difficult to ask her. Plus, we will be in separate baths of course, so she can't show me what to do! Since your English is so good, could you give me some pointers? After I enter the bathhouse, what should I do? I want to act very naturally so that Japanese don't give me strange looks. Hope you can help. I owe you one! Thanks,*

*Steve*

#### Steps for proper etiquette in a Japanese public bath

**I. Basic steps.** Use words like *first, second, next, after that, before,* and *finally* to explain the basic steps of taking a bath.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**II. Special warnings.** If you really want to emphasize any points in particular, use expressions like *don't forget to..., whatever you do, don't..., be careful not to..., the absolute most important thing is to/not to..., Japanese people will freak out if you...*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Appendix 2. Public bath simplified story

### Otaru public bath case study

**A:** By 1999, David Aldwinckle had lived in Japan for more than a decade. He had a Japanese wife and children and spoke Japanese fluently. So, he was quite shocked one day when he went to a public bath in Otaru and was refused entry. “What in the world are you talking about?” a startled David asked the manager.

**B:** The manager explained his side of the story: “Before, we had many Russian sailors come here. They didn’t understand Japanese bathing etiquette. They were very loud and rowdy in the bath and drank a lot. This is not proper etiquette, so they drove away my Japanese customers. I had no choice but to ban foreigners from my business.”

Still, David pleaded with him, “Listen, I have lived in Japan a long time. I speak Japanese and of course I understand Japanese bathing rules.”

“Sorry,” said the manager, “no foreigners allowed.”

**C:** The story doesn’t end there. Since David loved Japan and wanted to stay there with his family, he decided to become a Japanese citizen. After he became a citizen, he proudly went back to the same public bath. But, amazingly he was refused again. Even though he showed the manager his ID card showing that he was a Japanese citizen, the manager said, “Well, maybe this card says you are Japanese. But when my customers see you, they still see a foreigner...”

David was furious, and he decided he needed to do something about this discrimination. He decided to sue both the public bath which refused him and the city of Otaru for not doing enough to stop racial discrimination in the city.

### Listening comprehension questions

A1: How long has David lived in Japan?

A2: How is his Japanese level?

A3: What happened to David one day when he went to the public bath?

B1: Why did the public bath manager do what he did?

B2: What did David say to the manager?

B3: How did the manager reply to David’s explanation?

C1: Why couldn’t David enter the public bath after becoming a Japanese citizen?

C2: What will David do now?

**Appendix 3. Mr. Baseball sample lesson**

**Mr. Baseball worksheet**

**Plot Summary:** *In this movie, Jack Elliot is an aging American baseball player who is sent to Japan to play baseball for the Chunichi Dragons. Jack knows little or nothing about Japanese culture and isn't very excited about going there, so of course he encounters many cultural differences as he begins his new life in Japan. Watch this scene and take notes on the mistakes that Jack makes as he starts his new life in Japan.*

**Conditionals:** To use this pattern, you have to combine two clauses. Look at the examples below about John and some mistakes he made because of cultural differences.

**Situation**

John didn't know enough about Japanese communication styles.

John didn't know much about Japanese dress customs.

John didn't know all the rules about using the public bath in Japan.

**Result/mistake**

John got upset with his boss for not communicating more directly

John wore a black tie to a job interview.

John got in the bath before rinsing all the soap from his body.

*1) If John had known more about Japanese communication styles, he wouldn't have gotten upset with his boss for communicating indirectly with him.*

*2) If John had known more about Japanese dress customs, he wouldn't have worn a black tie to a job interview.*

*3) If John had known all the Japanese bathing customs, he would have rinsed all the soap from his body before getting in the bath.*

**Task:** Watch the scene from the movie and try to catch all the mistakes Jack makes or problems he has because of cultural differences between the U.S. and Japan.

*If Jack had learned more about Japan before coming here, he...(would have.../wouldn't have...)*

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_