

Learner-Centered Cultural Understandings

Hugh Kirkwood
Rikkyo University

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The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT's) policy for foreign language education in Japanese elementary schools includes the aims that it should increase both learners' awareness of cultural differences and learners' appreciation of their own culture. Some teacher-centered approaches to culture in Japanese foreign language learning contexts, however, may be problematic due to their unintentional reinforcement or promotion of overly simplistic views of culture or stereotypes. In this paper I introduce episodes from my own teaching in which students were encouraged to consider, be creative with, and share both their existing and new cultural understandings without teacher control. These episodes suggest that while student-centered approaches to cultural understanding in the language classroom may require careful consideration of student needs and support from sympathetic institutions, such approaches have the potential to increase students' willingness to participate in cultural learning and to inspire nuanced understandings of culture.

文部科学省が掲げる日本の小学校における外国語教育の方策には、学習者の様々な文化的差異への気付きと自国文化理解の向上という目標が含まれている。しかし、日本の外国語学習で文化について教える教師中心の教育手法には、過度に単純化された文化的視点や固定観念を意図せず強調または助長してしまうことにより、問題を含むものがあるかもしれない。本論では、教師による過度な統制を取り払い、生徒がよく考え、創造性を持ち、これまでと新たに得た文化的理解を分かち合うよう方向付けた、著者の教育実践に基づくケーススタディーを紹介する。本ケーススタディーにより、語学授業で文化的理解を促進するために生徒中心の教育を実施するには、生徒のニーズへの注意深い配慮と組織全体の協力を必要とする一方で、生徒中心の教育は、文化の複雑さの理解と、文化の学習への参加について、生徒の高い自発性を引き出す大きな可能性があることが示された。

Atkinson (1999) argued that TESOL instructors need to develop and teach nuanced views of culture. He asserted that this requires maintaining a delicate balance between recognizing the contribution of human individuality to culture and recognizing the contribution of culture to human individuality. In this paper I describe my attempts to maintain such a balance while working as an assistant language teacher (ALT) in two Japanese public elementary schools and using the official textbooks for the fifth and sixth grades, *Hi, friends! 1* (MEXT, 2012a) and *Hi, friends! 2* (MEXT, 2012b). Teaching *Hi, friends!* involves showing pictures and videos that introduce aspects of life and culture in Japan and other countries; however, I felt that it was also important to learn about individual students' preexisting cultural understandings and experiences. This knowledge enabled me to adapt textbook activities in ways that encouraged greater levels of student participation. Allowing students to share their cultural understandings and experiences in creative activities also encouraged them to develop new understandings.

Cultural Understandings in Japanese Public Elementary Schools

According to Byram and Feng (2004), the interest in "teaching culture for intercultural competence" (p. 149) has greatly increased among TESOL instructors since the late 1980s. Byram and Feng linked this to a rapid increase in globalization, which encouraged teachers and researchers to examine the effects of context and language learners' understandings of context on learners' intercultural communication and language acquisition. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011) appears to be following this trend by calling for language teaching and international education that increase students' "capability of smooth communication" (p. 3) across national and cultural boundaries. MEXT (2011) made an argument for an increased focus on culture and communication, not only in reference to Japan's needs in a globalized world, but also to counter what the ministry claims is an increasingly inward looking focus among Japanese young people. This, the ministry argued, is leading to a widespread

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decline in their ability to communicate. MEXT asserts this is occurring in both their native and nonnative languages.

MEXT policy and its influence on material design, particularly the *Hi, friends!* textbooks, means that even if language teachers in Japanese public schools have little interest in dealing with cultural education or are uncomfortable with cultural education in language learning contexts, it is very difficult to avoid. A MEXT official who helped lead the creation of the *Hi, friends!* series, Naoyama (2012), explained that the textbooks were created to take students on a metaphorical world tour, raising their understandings of other cultures and peoples. It is for this reason that the series includes the multimedia content that introduces the students to aspects of children's lives in other countries (including countries where English is not predominantly spoken as a first language). The textbooks also introduce aspects of Japanese culture (such as folktales), due to an additional assertion made by Naoyama that the journey of cultural discovery in *Hi, friends!* should lead students to deepen their awareness of (what she assumed to be) their identity as Japanese people.

Potential Areas of Controversy When Teaching Cultural Understandings in Japanese Elementary Schools

Mike Guest (2002), who has spent much of his teaching career in Japan, warned against contrastive approaches to teaching culture, which help to cement stereotypes of cultural difference and lead to individual preferences (his example was his dislike of seafood being mistakenly ascribed to culture). In some aspects the *Hi, friends!* curriculum follows this pattern by showcasing images and videos from around the world that stress the differences in school lunches, children's daily routines, festivals, and sightseeing locations in various countries. *Hi, friends!* also exhibits characteristics of what Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), antibias educators focused on multiculturalism in the U.S., described as a "tourist curriculum" (p. 8). Like Guest, they warned against the reduction of a large number of human behaviors and understandings to a few points (often holidays and food) and they claimed such teaching reinforces patterns of thinking that are polarized between what is presumed to be the students' normal and everyday ways of living (represented by the majority of school life) and occasional forays into learning about apparently strange and exotic peoples.

Arguments have also been made about the roles and identities of the language teachers who introduce culture. For Kubota (1998), the role of native English speaking teachers (NESTs) hired from "the Inner Circle," that is, countries like the U.S. or the U.K., has been

particularly controversial (p. 301). She asserted that a preference for hiring these instructors, held by the owners of private language schools and by the Japanese government when hiring ALTs, has helped to reinforce an outlook on internationalization in Japan that tends "to define Japan's position only in relation to the West" (p. 301). Native-speaking teachers themselves may also express discomfort with the way their identities are perceived in Japanese language learning contexts. Some of the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme participants described by McConnell (2000) expressed frustration with being asked to give speeches such as "[fill in the country's] view of Japan" (p. 221), due to the assumption that they were able to speak for their nationalities as a whole.

My Approach to Teaching Cultural Understandings

While teaching in Japanese public elementary schools, I have tried to avoid teaching aspects of culture in ways that cement stereotypes. I have further tried to avoid dominating classes with my own interpretation of life in the U.K. Nevertheless, I have found it difficult to introduce culture as something more nuanced than a list of differences between the students I teach and people in other countries. Particularly when using the *Hi, friends!* curriculum, there have been times when I have found student reactions to cultural content problematic. For example, I showed the students videos of school lunches around the world from *Hi, friends!* including Indian school children using their hands to eat curry for lunch. I didn't know how best to respond when I heard students laughing and saying, "That looks disgusting!" or "I'm glad I'm Japanese."

Despite my discomfort with some students' reactions to cultural content, however, I do not feel that suppression of student discourse or tight control of the types of cultural content introduced is the best way to proceed. Instead, I will describe episodes when encouraging less teacher-centered interaction and paying attention to student reactions allowed me to recognize and learn about the preexisting knowledge and cultural understandings students brought with them to the classroom. In some cases, shifting to this learner-centered focus required me to engage in careful planning or provide extra guidance to students; but allowing these understandings to be shared helped create a starting point for the development or consideration of new cultural understandings. Rather than forcing new understandings on students, this shift in focus encouraged the students to use their own understandings in original, creative, and enjoyable ways.

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Episodes in Learner-Centered Cultural Understandings

The Context for the Episodes

My job title is assistant language teacher. According to my job description I am supposed to play a supportive role to Japanese homeroom teachers (HRTs) in foreign language classes. In practice, however, I plan and teach all the language classes while the HRTs take the supportive role. This is mainly due to the Japanese teachers' often lacking confidence in their ability to teach English, and lacking time to do the preparation required. Conversations with my ALT coworkers and friends suggest this is not unusual. This is supported by Aoki (2014), who claimed that many ALTs are also working in similar situations.

I teach in two elementary schools. One school has nearly 900 students, and the other has approximately 400. In both schools I use the *Hi, friends!* textbooks when teaching weekly fifth and sixth grade classes, and I use the schools' own curricula when teaching less frequent classes to the lower grades. Descriptions of the following episodes will focus on my attempts to implement the *Hi, friends!* textbooks. I have spent a long time contemplating them, as I have used them since they were published in 2012 and I am currently mandated to teach lessons from the texts 15 times a week. Using the same material from *Hi, friends!* repeatedly, however, does not mean I have followed the same patterns for every class every year. Differences in students' abilities, motivation levels, and willingness to communicate with each other have led me to adjust and reconsider previously successful approaches.

Another feature of my context that has led me to adjust my teaching practice and think deeply about shifting away from teacher dominated explorations of culture is the institutional reform taking place in the board of education (BOE) where I am located. These reforms have been described by Saito et al. (2015) as *Lesson Study for Learning Community* (LSLC), but are commonly referred to by teachers and students as *manabiai*, a Japanese term that gives a sense of learning together for mutual benefit. The goal of these reforms has been to develop communities with a "democratic culture" (p. 493) and they follow principles associated with collaborative learning. Proponents of this movement have stated that the ideal learning process consists of being acculturated by supportive actions from peers and authority figures, which enables individuals to perceive and manipulate the world in ways that benefit both the individual and the community into which they are acculturated (Oxford, 1997). These reforms, with their emphasis on peer-to-peer interaction and teachers playing a facilitative role, have not only made me reexamine my teaching, but have also helped create a situation where many teachers have been very encouraging and supportive about my attempts to implement student-centered explorations of culture.

Episode 1: International Rock, Scissors, Paper, and Teachers' Listening Role

I described earlier how *Hi, friends!*'s use of audiovisual content provoked reactions from the students that I found to be uncomfortable. I also implied that its focus on differences in school life, meals, festivals, and sightseeing locations could lead to it being interpreted as a tourist curriculum. Nevertheless, I still use these materials because they promote reactions in students that, while sometimes representing stereotypical views, are often signs of student interest, which can lead to students' attempts to find out more. One example of audiovisual materials I have found to be particularly useful was an activity introduced to the fifth grade students that introduces the ways children play rock-scissors-paper in different languages and encourages students to use these languages to play the game themselves.

Before considering the cultural aims of *Hi, friends!* I did not really understand the pedagogical value of introducing rock-scissors-paper to the class, beyond it being an activity that the students found enjoyable. However, my view has shifted. This occurred after showing the class a video segment in which two Japanese children are shown playing rock-scissors-paper. Unlike the forms of the game that I had observed the children play in school, the children in the video did not start by using the phrase "*Saisho wa gu!*" (first comes the fist!), and this caused me and many students to be confused. Fortunately, an outspoken student explained to everyone that the comedian Ken Shimura had popularized the phrase when using it to synchronize audiences playing the game in television shows. This account has been corroborated by radio and television interviews with Shimura (as cited in "Batsuichi' wa Sanma," 2015). He stated he coined the phrase while working on the television program *Hachiji dayo!* [It's Eight o'Clock!], which ran from 1969 to 1985.

This incident, which could have been interpreted as a student talking out of turn, had several positive effects. It taught me something new that I could share with other students and it inspired me to investigate the history of rock-scissors-paper. I found out that the versions of the game played in Europe and America today appear not to have become popular until the early 20th century and historians like Buescher (2010) have claimed they are likely to have originated from Japan. In the Edo period, there were many different variations of zero-sum hand games for children and adults, and these in turn may have originated from China (Linhart, 1998). I also learnt that games can not only be experienced, enjoyed, and played by students in different languages, but can also instigate contemplation and discussion of the way traditions move across boundaries, are localized, and are influenced by popular culture.

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The students' reaction to the rock-scissors-paper video also taught me another key lesson. This was that allowing students to interrupt and react in shock, and then making an honest attempt to understand their reactions to cultural materials, can transform activities that may appear to be superficial or stereotypical. Students' unscripted reactions can prompt investigations into the complex histories and global movement of ideas that underlie cultural life, even when the reactions occur during activities considered mundane or frivolous. This suggests that in addition to playing the role of a cultural expert, language teachers can also play a listening role.

Episode 2: Being Local Experts and Moving From the Familiar to the Unfamiliar

One lesson in *Hi, friends!* I found to be particularly difficult was a lesson for sixth grade students focused on travel. The aim of the lesson was for students to choose a country they would like to visit and present their desire to visit this country to their classmates using phrases like "Let's go to Italy" and "I want to eat pizza." Many students were unenthusiastic about this activity and they told me in Japanese they had no interest in travelling abroad. Even students who otherwise had high levels of English ability and motivation expressed discomfort by joking, "I want to go to my home. I want to play *Monster Hunter* (a computer game)." I found this situation to be frustrating, as the unenthusiastic students' attitudes to foreign travel were very different to my own, but rather than trying to force my viewpoint on the class I approached the situation by reexamining patterns of classroom interaction, particularly the students' willingness to communicate.

Oxford (1997) argued that learners' willingness to communicate, which involves taking risks when speaking, can vary from individual to individual, but that it is often most compromised when "the L2 student does not feel any link with the target language group or feels threatened by the loss of his or her native-language identity" (p. 8). Due to many students enthusiastically saying "I like Japan! I want to go to Japan!" or telling me they did not want to go to places outside their local area, I interpreted their lack of interest in foreign travel to be related to a fear of the unknown, or possibly to a feeling that it was a betrayal of their local area. Comments about the cost of international travel made by some students also suggested that they felt it was something restricted to the wealthy. In response to this assessment, I decided to introduce a supplementary activity in which students could recommend activities in the local prefecture to their classmates and me, before moving on to activities that involved travel abroad (or travel to different areas of Japan, for students who remained unenthusiastic about foreign travel).

The result of introducing this activity was that students all had common and more fa-

miliar frames of reference to discuss. I also used the schools' collaborative learning principles to encourage the students to work in groups to brainstorm lists of activities before each individual chose an activity to share with the class. After this, it was very rare that individual students suffered performance anxiety and, in such cases, other group members encouraged them to speak. It could be argued that by handing over the expert role to the students and taking on a receptive and listening role, I was reinforcing the stereotype of native English speakers as tourists in Japan. However, as I learnt more about my local area's places, traditions, and food, I was able to take on a more equitable role with the students by suggesting my own favorite places to them or chatting with them about the local food I liked and disliked. After using the target language to talk about familiar concepts, the students seemed better prepared to talk about unfamiliar concepts and had a better idea about what sightseeing and tourism entails. They then seemed to become more enthusiastic about travel abroad or travel to other areas of Japan.

Episode 3: Overcoming Difficulties Associated With Creative Expressions of Culture

The lesson in *Hi, friends!* with perhaps the strongest emphasis on cultural content is a sixth grade lesson focused on folktales and the Japanese story of Momotaro (the boy from the peach). The lesson also seems to share my aim of encouraging students to creatively explore culture by asking them to work in groups to produce skits based on original versions of the story. Unfortunately, many of the ALTs I have spoken to have found this lesson difficult to teach as it is a departure from other lessons in the curriculum, which are usually focused around practicing and using predetermined phrases and lists of vocabulary. In some cases, teachers, both HRTs and ALTs, may be opting to skip the folktales lesson altogether (private conversation with an ALT at the JALT2015 conference).

My problems with encouraging the students to produce skits based on the Momotaro story and the actions I took to improve the activity are described in Kirkwood (2015). In summary, the main problems I had with the activity were student anxiety about performing in front of their peers and students not using the five 45-minute classes allocated to producing and practicing their skits effectively. Like other ALTs, after teaching groups of students who spent the preparation time chatting about unrelated topics before acting out fight scenes with minimal dialogue, I also wanted to skip the activity and replace it with teacher-centered language learning. Remembering my aim to focus on nuanced understandings and creative uses of culture, however, I felt skipping the Momotaro activity would be a waste of an opportunity for students to share and explore their ideas about Japanese culture.

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I knew from looking at student work displayed in their classrooms that many students were skilled at illustrating and I knew many students liked to draw comics (or *manga*-type drawings) in their free time. So I decided to have the students create paper characters and backdrops and then video their performances, and I found that giving them this extra structure helped keep them focused on the task. Moving from illustrating to story making before finally performing was (as in the case of the student presentations about their local area) a way of moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Giving the students the chance to record their performances apart from their peers also helped to overcome problems with performance anxiety and provided the additional benefit of offering students the chance to evaluate their own performances when viewing the recordings later.

From my teacher's perspective, changing the activity also taught me a powerful lesson. While providing opportunities for creative expression of cultural understandings may need careful guidance and planning, embracing rather than avoiding these activities allows students to share cultural understandings and to even create cultural understandings that are entertaining and memorable. When given the appropriate support, the students were able to use the Momotaro story in different creative ways, with many groups choosing to create entertaining parodies, such as portraying Momotaro as a telephone fraudster. Some groups also blended the Momotaro story with cultural knowledge they had gained from popular culture or other school subjects. For example, several groups' performances made reference to historical figures featured in their social studies textbooks such as Commodore Perry.

Discussion

The episodes described above represent my attempts to approach cultural education for young learners in Japan in a way that touches on the nuanced, dynamic, and creative aspects of culture. It is hoped other teachers approaching culture and language teaching can benefit from reading about these experiences. However, because I decided to implement my ideas and approaches with specific circumstances and students at the forefront of my mind, these episodes alone are unlikely to provide any universally applicable solutions. Instead, this paper is intended to provoke discussion among policy makers, curriculum designers, teacher educators, and teachers about using the existing cultural understandings students bring to the classroom, rather than simply presenting the cultural *facts* students ought to know. Key questions include, "How can students be encouraged to express and share their cultural understandings?" and "How can students build on their shared understandings to create new understandings?" To find more answers,

however, more observation of the teaching of cultural content in Japanese public schools is required and teachers should be encouraged to record and share testimonies about their cultural encounters with students.

Bio Data

Hugh Kirkwood was formerly an assistant language teacher in two public elementary schools in Ushiku, Ibaraki. His professional interests have been focused mainly around the education of young learners in elementary schools. He is particularly interested in the cultural aspects of language teaching.

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