

RELEVANCE AS PEDAGOGY: CREATING CULTURALLY MEANINGFUL ESL READING MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

There is a high likelihood of university ESL students encountering situations where there is a necessity to utilise cultural awareness. This paper describes the experience of creating and teaching two lessons designed utilising scaffolding techniques and explains how cultural comprehension can be integrated into reading lessons. By introducing relevant cultural concepts in parallel with language learning, students will engage more with the lesson, are more likely to retain knowledge of vocabulary, and gain a deeper understanding of both the language and its practical use around the world.

INTRODUCTION

Creating relatable and relevant learning materials is an important strategy in order to engage second-language learners at the university level (Mamba, 2024). Students learning another language are able to benefit by being able to engage with those coming from different backgrounds using a more open and diverse perspective than they would otherwise be able to (Rustamova & Qayumova, 2024). It is necessary for them to gain an understanding of both language and culture (Wang, 2011). It is the role of the teacher to create content that will help the students to navigate such situations, give them confidence to engage with others, and also improve their comprehension skills regarding the lesson content itself.

This article presents the experience of creating and teaching two reading-based lessons on the topics of emotional expression and greeting customs. Both lessons were designed to address common intercultural communication challenges faced by Japanese university students. It has been said that "half the curriculum walks in the door with the students" (Najarro, 2022, para. 8). Each student brings with them their own individual beliefs, notions, and preconceived ideas that greatly impact the effectiveness of lesson materials used within the classroom. By creating lesson content with the students' intercultural context in mind, they are

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able to become more engaged and motivated to learn (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). The instructional methodology for these lessons utilised key skills including pre-reading prediction, guided vocabulary development, and post-reading reflection activities.

The following section examines the theoretical framework behind these lessons.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) provides a valuable framework for contextualising the cultural differences explored within these lessons. This framework is used to compare cultures across six dimensions, and it is a valuable tool to enable the comparison of cultural values. These six dimensions are: power distance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs short-term orientation, and indulgence vs restraint. The use of such a framework allows educators and academics to compare and predict how these values shape behaviour and communication styles across societies.

For example, Japan's relatively high score in collectivism compared to Western individualism becomes relevant in the lesson centred on expressing emotions (Bergiel et al., 2012). In collectivist societies like Japan, emotions are often moderated to maintain group harmony, contrasting with the more open expression typical in individualist Western cultures (Asai, 2021; Markus & Kitayama, 2014).

Another contrast exists in regards to Japan's higher power distance dimension. Power distance refers to how accepting people are of power and authority. Due to this higher power distance dimension, Japanese people are more likely to accept hierarchy. This is relevant in the teaching of formalised greeting customs familiar to the students, such as the acknowledgment of hierarchical relationships through specific bowing angles and linguistic honorifics (De Mente, 2011; Echo, 2024).

The uncertainty avoidance dimension further illuminates why Japanese greeting rituals tend to be more structured and predictable compared to the casual greetings common in low uncertainty avoidance cultures; it has been said that "there are formalities even between close friends" in Japan (Van Wolferen, 1989, as cited in McVeigh, 1994, p.1). Use of such a framework in materials design is also pertinent to the target audience. The students of this class are likely to interact with people from overseas on a regular basis as the number of exchange students in Japan increases (ICEF, 2025), and an ever-increasing number of Japanese students take advantage of the opportunity to study abroad (Enrich, 2025).

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By introducing students to these dimensional differences through concrete examples of emotional expression and greeting customs, both lessons provide learners with practical communication strategies which they will be able to use outside of the classroom.

In addition to Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), these lessons were also designed in relation to Hall's high/low context communication theory (Broeder, 2021). This theory discusses how high-context communication uses implicit clues such as body language and tone to convey meaning, whereas low-context communication utilises clear, explicit verbal messages to ensure understanding (Sheposh, 2025). Students will have likely been raised in, and therefore be familiar with, the Japanese high-context culture where meaning is primarily conveyed implicitly through shared cultural knowledge rather than with explicit verbal communication (Broeder, 2021; Falsgraf & Majors, 1995). This contrasts sharply with low-context Western communication styles where directness is traditionally valued higher and criticisms of indirectness are common (Joyce, 2012). The reading materials in both lessons help students recognise the differences between higher and lower context communication.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, these cultural communication patterns become embedded in language itself through pragmatic norms, lexical choices, and discourse patterns (House & Kádár, 2023; Tariq et al., 2019; Smith, 2024). Using authentic texts that describe differing cultural approaches helps students to simultaneously develop both linguistic competence and pragmatic awareness.

THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

With this link between language and cultural concepts established, students are able to benefit both linguistically and socioculturally, an advantage over traditional lecture-based reading lessons (Wang, 2011). When designing these lessons, careful consideration was given to the Japanese university context in which they are designed to be implemented.

Japanese communication norms are significantly shaped by the cultural concepts of *honne* and *tatemae*, these stand for the distinction between a person's true feelings and what is considered to be more socially appropriate (Berglund, 2004). This dichotomy creates a communication style where emotions, particularly negative ones, are often suppressed in public contexts to maintain social harmony (Schouten et al., 2020). Japanese students in an academic environment risk struggling when interacting with Western interlocutors who may expect more direct emotional expression. Such students may interpret Japanese emotional

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restraint as disinterest or disagreement. This friction between those used to communicating directly and those more comfortable with an indirect communication style risks compounding existing communication challenges that come with engaging with others in a second language (Meres, 1998).

The article used in the *Expressing Emotions* lesson was selected as it talks about loneliness, which research indicated is a major social concern in Japan, particularly among university students (Silva, 2020), making the content further culturally relevant and personally engaging.

Similarly, Japanese greeting rituals involve complex non-verbal components that encode social information about status, formality, and relationship dynamics. Various different aspects such as the precise angle of a bow and accompanying verbal formulas signal specific social meanings that have no direct equivalent in Western handshake culture (Echo, 2024; Fernandez, 2009; Nishiyama, 2000). This creates intercultural challenges as Japanese students often report discomfort with the physical informality and reduced status-marking in Western greetings (Kowner, 2002). By producing content relevant to the students such as this, they are able to become engaged and motivated to a greater extent, therefore are more likely to take advantage of the increased chances to use the language with students from other cultural backgrounds (ICEF, 2025; Skarpaas, 2023; Willis, 2007).

These communication differences are inadequately addressed in traditional Japanese English education, which continues to focus on grammatical accuracy and translation skills over communicative competence (Fujiwara, 2018). This continues to be true even at the tertiary educational level. Despite recent Ministry of Education (MEXT) policy changes encouraging communicative language teaching (Yamazaki et al., 2023), classroom practices frequently overlook the cultural dimensions of language use and students often feel that they can “opt out” of globalisation (Morita, 2013, p. 31). Intercultural communication skills should be seen as a priority for their future professional development in an increasingly globalised world (Hudzik, 2011). The following sections will look in further detail at the pedagogical design of both lessons.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN: EXPRESSING EMOTIONS LESSON

The *Expressing Emotions* lesson was designed with three learning objectives: to develop students’ ability to identify cultural differences in emotional expression, to increase vocabulary comprehension related to emotions and cultural reactions, and to encourage critical reflection on students’ own cultural norms regarding emotional display.

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The text for this lesson (Castelletti & Miret, 2023) provides an ideal foundation for these learning objectives through its cross-cultural comparison of patterns of emotional expression. It examines expressing emotions across a multitude of countries which creates natural comparison points with Japanese emotional norms, while the reference to loneliness will further resonate with contemporary Japanese social concerns (Murayama et al., 2023). The article's moderate length and accessible academic language, as confirmed with the CEFR profiler Vocab Kitchen (<https://www.vocabkitchen.com/>), suits intermediate university students of English while also introducing them to new units of vocabulary.

The pre-reading activities were structured in order to activate the students' schema and build prediction skills essential for effective reading comprehension, alongside targeting critical thinking skills such as evaluating potential biases (Alemi & Ebadi, 2010). Various key terms were chosen for this activity in order to prompt cognitive preparation for the full article. A discussion question was also used to fulfil dual purposes: it engages personal experience while also subtly introducing the concept of display rules that varies across cultures. Display rules refer to the socially learned norms that influence when, how, and where emotions should be expressed.

During reading, vocabulary acquisition is scaffolded through the usage of highlighted key terms. Students were tasked to match definitions to these words after reading the article in its entirety. Units of vocabulary were chosen based on being particularly essential for discussing emotions across cultures. The text's organisation uses clear subheadings, further challenging the students to understand words from the context around them. The use of both headings and subheadings has also been found to increase students' comprehension (Grant, 1993).

Post-reading activities progress from lower-order to higher-order thinking skills. This activity order was used to follow Bloom's taxonomy progression from comprehension to analysis (Bloom et al., 1956; Conklin, 2005; Huitt, 2011). The basic vocabulary defining exercise mentioned above reinforces terminology acquisition, while the true/false assessment checks factual comprehension. The use of final open-ended comprehension questions requires deeper analysis from the students and helps to solidify their learning.

The final activity for students is a personal reflection question. This final task moves students from knowledge acquisition to personal application. By asking them to share their own opinions on the topic, it encourages critical cultural comparison that develops intercultural sensitivity and

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further activates both the vocabulary and the intercultural information (Bloom et al., 1956; Conklin, 2005; Huitt, 2011).

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN: GREETINGS LESSON

The *Greetings* lesson was created in a similar style; factoring in the need for ESL students to simultaneously develop reading, vocabulary, and intercultural skills. There are three learning objectives: for students to gain awareness of and to be able to explain cultural differences in greeting customs, to be able to reflect on their own cultural greeting practices while recognising assumptions they may bring when meeting those from another culture, and to increase vocabulary comprehension on the topic of greetings. These learning objectives allow students to develop reading skills as well as cultural competency (Muhria et al., 2025).

The chosen text (Echo, 2024) was used as it provides a good examination of cultural practices across diverse cultures. The literature has shown that including a relatable example early on in an academic text, with this example being the comparison between hand shakes and bowing, is good practice to increase student engagement for the remainder of the lesson (Mamba, 2024). The article is also of a similar level to the text used in the *Expressing Emotions* lesson (Castelletti & Miret, 2023), as confirmed with Vocab Kitchen (<https://www.vocabkitchen.com/>).

The activities used follow the same pre-reading, post-reading and reflection structure as the other lesson, promoting familiarity for the students which has been shown to produce more accurate and fluent results (Rahimpour, 2007). The students are first asked to analyse both the title and relevant images in order to predict the article content. Keywords from the upcoming article are also provided at this point to assist in activating the students' prior knowledge. This multi-modal approach in pre-reading activities was chosen to aid students in their comprehension of the article. By using a discussion question with the metaphor of greetings being "social lubricants" (Echo, 2024, para. 2), students are introduced to not only new language but also the sociological concept of greetings being a tool to build a sense of community and with others (Shields-Lysiak et al., 2020).

Vocabulary highlighting was again used to prime students for the post-reading definition matching activity, with the words being carefully selected in order to represent concepts essential for intercultural analysis. The research has shown that the use of a vocabulary highlighting strategy is able to enhance understanding in content-based language instruction (Hasanabadi et al., 2016). However, this text differs from the previous one by using subheadings throughout the article which provides additional scaffolding for comprehension (Grant, 1993). Research has found that by

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introducing students to different textual genres, students' reading abilities are able to be further improved (Rozimela, 2014).

The post-reading activities begin with true/false questions focusing on factual comprehension of the article, followed by open-ended questions requiring students to analyse the historical evolution and cultural significance of different greeting customs. Bloom's taxonomy progression (Bloom et al., 1956; Conklin, 2005; Huitt, 2011) was again used to benefit the students. The lesson ends with a final reflection question to link the content with the students' own lived experiences. This style of questioning aids with concept retention through autobiographical connection while also allowing students to develop metacognitive awareness of cultural practices, this being a vital aspect of intercultural sensitivity development.

INSTRUCTIONAL RATIONALE AND SCAFFOLDING APPROACH

The two lessons were designed to utilise scaffolding techniques throughout, meaning that the activities provide highly structured support initially, and this gradually decreases as the lesson progresses (Taber, 2018). Scaffolding has been found to reduce learner anxiety and increase the willingness for students to participate (Nguyen, 2022). Anxiety among students is likely to be high when presented with a text that presents cultural concepts and language unfamiliar to the learner (Rajab et al., 2012). As the activities become less structured, self-regulated learning and learner autonomy is promoted in order to encourage more independence (Song & Kim, 2020). Enabling students to become more comfortable with self-regulated learning has been found to greatly benefit their academic progress (Saito, 2020; Ueno et al., 2025).

Structured tasks, such as matching vocabulary words to their definition, and semi-structured tasks, which question the student's understanding of the article itself, focus on accuracy and build a foundation for the higher-level thinking required to fully comprehend the cultural concepts presented (Bloom et al., 1956; Conklin, 2005; Huitt, 2011). Students must be aware of different cultural customs before they can reflect on their own (Nieto, 2006). Unstructured tasks, where students are asked to apply the concept to their personal experiences, challenge students to understand their own context in relation to other cultures. Through the use of such activities, students are able to gain better intercultural sensitivity (Sobkowiak, 2019).

The learner is more likely to retain vocabulary words when provided with multiple opportunities to use them (Lee & Muncie, 2006). Students have the opportunity to understand vocabulary definitions through the context provided by the surrounding words, a necessary technique for improving

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reading comprehension (McBain, 2011). They are also encouraged to utilise scanning through comprehension questions, another valuable reading skill (Hashemzadeh, 2012; Punar-Ozcelik & Uzun, 2021).

ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING EVALUATION

The lessons were designed to be evaluated primarily through formative assessment during class time. It has been found that “attention to formative assessment can lead to significant learning gains” (Black & William, as cited in Popham, 2008, p. 10). Upon completion of each task in the lesson, students are encouraged to discuss their answers and work together to check comprehension. This style of assessment results in higher academic motivation, better self-regulation skills and lower test anxiety (Ismail et al., 2022). Giving students time to check answers together before eliciting them to the class as a whole aids in retention of the material and boosts engagement (Zong & Schunn, 2025). This allows the explicit feedback from the teacher to be delayed and given after the peer-checking, rather than immediate, promoting greater long-term retention in particular for the vocabulary activities (Metcalfe et al., 2009) used in both lessons.

Both lessons were created with material that is able to be connected to students' own cultural knowledge, background, and lived experiences (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). This consideration also applies when planning how the students' work itself should be assessed and evaluated. As supported by Cataldo (2021), factoring in cultural aspects in feedback allows educators to more accurately gauge students' true proficiency and growth. This is further reinforced by culturally responsive pedagogy (Eden et al., 2024). In the Japanese context, an example of this would be considering that students often want to save face and, therefore, direct written feedback may garner better results than oral feedback in the classroom (Deng, 2016; Yoshida, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Language learners need more than vocabulary lists and comprehension questions in order to successfully progress and develop. By integrating cultural concepts into lessons, students can better engage with the content and learn valuable skills which they can use in real-life situations (Meraji & Zamanian, 2014). The lessons presented in this paper provide an example of content that focuses on giving students a cultural understanding of emotional communication and greetings customs. However, these topics are only a small fraction of the intercultural skills required by a learner looking to interact with other cultures in any capacity.

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Cultural awareness is a broad area, ranging from the small “bless you” to larger concepts of beliefs and values from one country to another. Especially in a country with a largely homogenous population such as Japan, students may not yet be aware of the collective nature of their own culture (Cusick, 2007). There is a need to expand lessons to include these ideas, adding a deeper level of understanding and practicality for the learner. While this paper focused on the creation of two reading lessons in particular, it is possible to integrate culture into almost any other type of language lesson. With the use of scaffolding, culture can be taught in parallel with language, resulting in learners with a higher engagement in the lesson and assisting teachers to reach their teaching objectives. In addition to language, learners need communicative competence and cultural awareness to become a well-rounded, autonomous individual and able to take their abilities outside the classroom environment.

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