

## Integrating Culture in Japanese Language (Nihongo) Teaching

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### Abstract

*This study described the responses of the students in integrating culture in teaching the Japanese language. Specifically, it described the students' interest in learning the culture and Nihongo; 2) determined the vocabulary learned by the students after each session, and 3) reflected on the intercultural relationship of Filipino and Japanese culture. Learning Japanese Nihongo is interesting through the study of Japanese culture embedded in the words. Words that were easily learned and remembered were nouns and adjectives which pertain to foods and beautiful places in Japan; however, fewer verbs were listed as remembered. There were so many cultural practices admired by students. For them, learning Nihongo is embedded in the culture of the Japanese. There were observed similarities or equivalent words from Japanese to the Filipino language, however, observed cultural practices in action have no flawless match. Furthermore, this study highly recommends offering Nihongo classes to ABEL students with a teacher having studied the language and have lived experience of Japanese culture. At the same time, the ABEL Department shall have a strong linkage with some Japanese schools, universities, or communities.*

**Keywords:** Nihongo, Japanese, Filipino, English, culture, language teaching, students, learning

### Introduction

Foreign languages have been integrated as a required subject for language courses like Bachelor of Art in English Language (ABEL). At Pangasinan State University, there are four foreign languages offered for the students to choose from. These foreign languages include the languages from Spain, Japan, China, and Korea. The teacher of the Nihongo (Japan) class has exposure to the foreign language, has awareness, and has experienced the culture of the country during Home Stay Program alongside her scholarship. Nihongo was the foreign language offered during the school year 2019-2020. The University selected Nihongo so that the English major students will have an experience of speaking the language after English. The authors experienced Japanese culture while visiting historical places, schools, and museums. During the authors' educational trip and Home Stay Program, they experienced, observed, and learned to understand Japanese culture. They learned to appreciate the language through the frequent encounter with Japanese friends, students, leaders, and teachers.

Language and culture are blended to go side by side in such a way that language is the verbal expression of culture. It conveys experience with people, environment, food, festivals, songs, and dance. This is why Japanese is a go-to language for food. One can experience Japanese culture through food. For example, in ordering food, it may involve two famous apologizing words like “*sumimasen*” and “*arigato*”. It's why in Japanese, refusing an

offer sometimes requires two words “*gomennnasai*” and “*suminasen*”, two of which may involve apologizing when a simple English “No” might suffice in a similar situation like refusing an offer.

Beyond vocabulary and grammar rules, somewhere in the world, a group of wonderful people uses the language you are teaching in the classroom. In the vibrant culture, language classes instantly become exciting through educational experiences. In some world language courses, there is a strong focus on language skills, grammar, and writing but culture is overlooked. Sometimes it's even missing from the curriculum entirely. This represents a missed opportunity for student engagement. There is a culture so beautiful, it can make the pages of a language textbook interesting. As teachers, we always look for ways to make our lessons interesting. We go to great lengths of motivation just to maintain students' interest in our classes. So how can we bring splendor and excitement into the classroom? Well, culture is a very powerful link that colors the teaching of Language. It can heighten the interest and motivation of the students.

The importance of this study is to discuss the relevance of Japanese culture in Nihongo teaching. This helps language learners become aware of the culture in Japan, cross-cultural awareness and language appreciation with competence, and become aware of the extra-

linguistic issues in cross-cultural communication (Akramova, 2017). Different strategies, approaches, and techniques can be used to learn a foreign language. Cultural approach and experiential learning is the best way to learn a language. In this study, approaches like storytelling, dialogue, role play, picture prompt, videos, and focus group discussion enhance the medium of instruction to understand the language together with culture.

### Methodology

Language entails message-sending and is a communicative tool; It also is a communicative and intercultural tool (Ehsan Abbaspour, Mahdi Rajaei Nia, Javad Zare, 2012). A person should know how to build relationships while speaking the language so that understanding needs to be addressed. This is not an easy task, since Nihongo when spoken implies a certain view that is not always shared by those who learned the language as a foreign one. This is why the intercultural communicative skill involves far more than a word exchange: it is also about building up relationships and communicating successfully with others, thus sharing the same point of view.

This is a qualitative action research (Trang Thi Thuy Nguyen, 2017) done in one semester, two Nihongo classes where 78 students were involved. In this approach, the teacher designed and applied intercultural language courses/lessons for learners in college in an attempt to involve learners in deciding the topics/theme to be discussed while learning a language in a cultural context. The intercultural approach draws upon the idea that culture is best learned through a comparison of the target and the learners' own culture. Though the main focus is on the target culture, the intercultural approach pinpoints the relationship between the learners' own culture. This approach is aimed at developing learners' understanding of intercultural and communicative competencies. The students were exposed to videos, stories, and planned dialogue activities in which they built to identify vocabulary, compared and contrasted different cultural aspects addressed. After the course, the students shall realize that they became more reflective and critical readers/speakers of the language and made progress toward becoming more critical intercultural learners.

The researchers typically aim to tap into the four modes of communication: speaking, listening, reading, and a little of writing since kanji, katakana and hiragana are difficult and the course is just for one semester. The researchers want their students to build upon and enjoy their communicative skills in Japanese and to expand their cultural knowledge in the process. There were four steps followed in the

Thus, this study would like to 1) describe the responses of the students on Japanese culture by learning Nihongo; 2) to determine the vocabulary learned by the students after each session, and 3) to reflect on the intercultural relationship of Filipino and Japanese culture.

design of the course. After all, the language teachers strive not only to equip their students with the language they need to communicate but also to ignite curiosity and create global awareness and cultural competence. The four steps utilized were (1) *Select*: Before teaching, students responded to the pictures posted/shown and the topic to be discussed for the week. The picture was associated with the target language whereby a theme was developed. Then, interesting words were listed on the board. (2) *Dialogue* making reactions on cultural connections using themes to spark student interest and engagement. (3) *Discuss additional* video clips, songs, images, infographics, pictures, or articles directly from the target language related to the topic. (4) *Examine* one's own cultural norms and traditions. Students should not only be immersed in the cultures associated with the target language but also make comparisons with their own backgrounds.

*Procedure in thematic focusing*: Once the students have focused on one topic/theme they like to concentrate on, culturally associated words are listed and classified according to parts of speech such as nouns, verbs and adjectives. If the unit theme is about eating habits, food preparation (*obento*), home mealtimes and popular dishes in target language communities, the theme shall be food, in the restaurant or the dinner. Students explore and experience eating and ordering in a cafeteria or restaurant, and patterns of conversations noted from the dialogue.

When the students come up with connections, keep checking in. What and how much of the language, cultural knowledge are students gaining? Ideally, they should acquire insights into the daily lives of people who speak the target language. Thus, this study would like (1) to **describe the responses** of ABEL students about Japanese culture by learning Nihongo. Responses were asked immediately after the each topic whether it is "Very interesting" (VI), "Interesting" (I), or "Not interesting" (NI); (2) **To determine the vocabulary**

learned and remembered by the students on the theme, they were asked to list words (3) to reflect on the **intercultural relationship of Filipino and Japanese Culture**, comparison of both practices were discussed.

There were four approaches used in teaching (PTRP), (1) *Picture Prompt*- this approach shows a picture or video with no explanation but rather students identified the theme that revolved around the picture and explained it. (2) *Teacher storytelling/ dialogue-brainstorming in a circle*- the group of students discussed an issue on the theme to

plan the role play; (3) - *Role Play* whereby, the teachers assign roles during the dialogue related to the theme, students rehearse their parts at home and they act it out in class. Observers (other students) critique and ask questions (4) *PowerPoint Presentation*. In this approach, teaching is computer mediated, students were grouped into three and focused their attention on the picture, video, PowerPoint presented as material to the class. During the final exam, a group of students spend five minutes presenting their own video clip of a dialogue in Nihongo with an established theme.

## Results And Discussion

Analysis of research was based from the responses of the students about the picture or materials displayed. There were 12 themes or topics identified whereby conversational dialogue in Japanese language were prepared. These topics/themes for conversational dialogue were the following: 1) How do you do?; 2) Where is the bank?, Where are you going?, where do you want to go?; 3) What time is the next Hikari?, How many hours is it?, When is your trip; 4) In the restaurant, How many tables? How many persons?; 5) How much is the sukiyaki; 6) What did you do yesterday?; 7) Can you cook, sing, dance?; 8) Shall

we go together?; 9) May I sit here?; 10) How does it taste?; 11) Do you like taking pictures in the garden?; 12) V-NAI form + kudasai (Emiko Konomi, 2015).

### Responses and Reactions of Students about the Dialogue/Story/Picture/Video

Table 1 shows the students' responses about the topic/theme of the discussion and the word list or vocabulary which are learned and remembered.

**Table 1. Students' Responses on the Topics Discussed and Word List**

Topic	Response	Word/Phrase List
1. How do you do?	VI	Ohayo gozaimasu; dozo yoroshiku ;hito; konbanwa'desu; ka; konnichiwa; genki desu ka; sayonara, arigato.
2. Where is the bank? Where are you going? Where do you want to go?	VI	Ginko; yubin-kyuko;hon-ya; arigato; do-itashimashite; asoko; hana-ya; pan-ya, names of places in Japan
3. What time is the next Hikari? How many hours is it? When is your trip?	I	Shinkansen; tsugi; densha; nan-ji; arigato; Tokyo eki; jikan; kara; arigato days of the week and months
4. In the restaurant, how many tables? How many people?	VI	Resutoran; go-kai; san-kai; ebi; nin; arimasu; nomimono; arigato;hoteru, numbers for counting; oishi
5. How much is the sukiyaki?	VI	Ebi; tempura; o-nomimono; ikura; denwa; zasshi; sumimasen; arigato
6. What did you do yesterday?	I	Kanko-basu; kenbutsu; shimashita; ikimashita;torimashita, torimasen; kino; tabemasu
7. Can you cook? sing? dance?	VI	Ryori; tsukuru; dekimasu; josu; dekimasen;demo; utau; kuru; heta; arigato
8. Shall we go together?	I	Haru; umi; oyogu; ja mata; ikimasho; yama
9. May I sit here?	NI	Hai; iie; kabuki; arigato;
10. V-te/de form + kudasai?	NI	Yonde; nonde; hanashite; isoide; kaite
11. Do you like taking pictures in the garden? Do you like to travel?	VI	Shashin; torimasu; Disneyland; Fuji yama; subarashii; arigato, names of parks and gardens in Japan
12. V-NAI form + kudasai	NI	Akenai-de; ika-nai de; kawanai de; osanai-de;

Legend: VI= very interesting; V= Interesting; NI= Not Interesting

Students' responses on the eight topics are found to be "very interesting" as shown in Table 1. Topics like: How do you do?, Where is the bank?, Where do you want to go?, In the restaurant?, How much is the (object)?, Can you cook?, Do you like to travel? And do you like taking pictures?, dealt with greetings and important conversations. Students experienced and practiced greetings with bowing in Topic 1. They associated bowing as a sign of respect to the person addressed. Japanese bowing plus greetings is a sign of respect and honor to the person. The use of "*desu*" and "*masu*" for verbs were commonly used in the sentences.

Topic 2 on finding a place is a very interesting dialogue too, because students have to pronounce the words clearly in order to find the place in the instruction. In the dialogue, there were directions like *migi*, *hidari* and *masogu* whereby students had difficulty in remembering directions like left and right. This made them in trouble going to the bank (*ginko*) or hospital (*byoin*). Students were happy looking for directions. The students kept on noticing and appreciating the beauty of Japan, the softness of the voice of the female, respectfulness and politeness of the Japanese in all dialogue. In telling the time, the word "*ji*" is the same as "o'clock" in English. The students easily spotted the commonality of the words in telling the time. They found it easy to read time, such patterns like Nihongo number + "*ji*" like *itchi ji*, *san ji*, were easily read and spoken.

The topic on the restaurant was also "very interesting", students were amazed with foods they would like to order. According to the students, all pictures of Japanese foods are "*oishi*". They associated the word "*oishii*" with their favorite snack food Oishi. Now the students learned that their favorite crunchy snack food is truly delicious in meaning. Other favorite dialogues were about how much is the sukiyaki? Can you cook? And do you like to travel? Students had an exciting experience when the dialogue was about foods and places. The findings implies that students had a "very interesting" experience when the topic dealt with Japanese culture on foods and beautiful places of Japan.

However, students experienced "not interesting" topics about "May I sit here?" and "V-te/de form + kudasai?", "V-nai-de from + kudasai". Students gave their reasons why they found these three topics "Not Interesting". Their common responses were the following; there are rules to remember; and root word of the verbs are difficult to remember. Thus, conjugation of Japanese verbs and Japanese syntax is difficult to remember. Verbs are usually at the end of the sentence. Like; I'm going to school (English) to, *Gakko e ikimasu* (Nihongo).

The students enjoyed the theme on "The Restaurant". Four groups out of five made their own Nihongo video all about food. Everybody participated well in the final exam dialogue. They kept on repeating the dialogue or some words in the dialogue like *arigato*, *ohayo sensei*. The teacher asked them why they wanted the topic. They enjoyed the pictures of the foods they wanted to order at the same time looking forward to tasting the foods as they all aspire to go to Japan.

### List of Favorite Vocabulary Learned/ Remembered

During the discussion in every topic the researcher often checked in words that students often mentioned. And to validate these words, students were asked to list vocabulary that they liked and were remembered and after each week or topic, the reason why they remembered them. Table 1 shows the words that students like to mention and remember. It is evident that words like *arigato*, *masu*, were repeatedly listed in almost all topics. In addition to this, students listed more nouns that were remembered like names of places such as Disneyland, *Osaka jo* (Osaka Castle), Narra, Fuji Yama (Mt. Fuji), Golden Temple, Zoo, *depato* (department store), *hon ya* (book store), *Den den town* (Electronic town) and *eki* (train station) where lots of stores are found. Words for foods include *maguro sashimi* (raw Tuna), *ebi tempura* (shrimp tempura), *sushi*, *odon* (Noodles), *kohii* (coffee), *katsudon* (rice toppings) and *o-kashi* (sweet), *o-mizu* (drinking water). Other common words were nouns which are usually used by the students such as, *denwa* (telephone), *enpitsu* (pen) *terebe* (television), *kaban* (bag), *hon* (book), and *zasshi* (magazine). There were also adjectives listed but still related to food like, *oishii* (delicious), *okii ebi* (big shrimp), *hotto* (hot), and *supai* (sour).

It is very remarkable to know and listen to the students who wanted to memorize greetings and some other phrases which they apply to their daily conversations with friends. These greetings are the following: *ohayo gozaimasu* (good morning), *o-negai shimasu* (please); *konnichiwa* (hi or good afternoon); *konbanwa* (good evening), *sumimasen* (excuse me), *ja ne ashita aimasho* (so, see you tomorrow), *ja mata* ( see you later), *gochiso-sama deshita* (it was delicious, with gratitude for having eaten), *itadakimasu* ( I will receive or before eating), *domo arigato gozaimasu* (thank you very much), *O-genki desu ka?* (How are you/ Are you well); *A so desu ka* ( Oh I see), *do-itashimashite* ( you are welcome), and *Kyo wa ii-tenki desu* (today is good weather). In addition to this, students asked the teacher how "I love you" (*Ai shiteru*) is expressed.

The listing of favorite words, phrases and expressions implies that the students learned some favorite words and expressions from the dialogue

that was role played. Words that were easily remembered were nouns, expressions, a little of adjectives, very rare for verbs and use of particles for contemporary conversations. These words and phrases have important meanings in the daily conversations of the students such as words for foods and beautiful places.

### ***Intercultural relationship of Filipino and Japanese Culture***

There is an inseparable link between Japanese language and culture (Elena Spathis, 2020). "Nihongo is a distinctive language that makes it interesting to acquire but makes it challenging to master" (quote from a student and from GaijinPot Blog Jul 25, 2014 ). There were reasons why the students commented on the difficulty of mastering Nihongo, these are the following: 1) the tone of voice of the speaker, particularly the female voice, 2) the actions or observed behavior associated with the word being uttered, and the pronunciation of words. In other words, learning Nihongo is concomitant with culture. In order to speak the language correctly, it is necessary to learn about Japanese culture. However, because the culture is so distinct, there are so many aspects which are difficult for foreigners to understand.

In order to speak the language correctly, it is necessary to learn about Japanese culture. This study used three ways to incorporate culture in Nihongo teaching such as; consulting authentic sources such as news outlets and literature; traveling to Japan; seeking the perspectives of a Japanese on the cultural heritage by inviting guest speakers/teachers to speak directly with the students; collaborate with other educators; make cultural comparisons through self-reflection, with those of Japanese. (Gomez & Rodriguez, 2012),

In learning Nihongo, students observed humility and modesty, which play a vital role in Japanese culture. The action of bowing was depicted in every dialogue at the start and at the end of the conversation. Humility by Japanese people is not only shown by various forms of politeness in speech, but it is also shown on a daily basis by various types of bowing (in addition to other reasons such as apologizing and showing gratitude) Taking a bow is a non-contact greeting for Japanese which is most essential during COVID 19 pandemic because you make distance with people. Japanese greet others by *Ohayo* or *Konnichiwa* (Noburo Sakai, 2018) or talking about the weather or by asking, "are you healthy?" (*o-genki desu ka? Or kyo wa ii*

*tenki desu ne*). For the Filipinos, a sign of respect for the elders is shown by kissing of the hands or "*mano po*". Greetings at the start are usually opened by Hi or Hello and *Kumusta ka?* (How are you?) or shaking of hands.

Japanese culture is so unique. It is composed of modern and traditional experiences. The younger generation could exhibit very modern behaviors, talk and dress differently but they still follow traditions their elders have taught them. Traditions of giving due respect to elders and authority by using *shimasu* for verbs, *o-negai shimasu*, *arigato*, and *kudasai* were well observed in the dialogue. The Filipinos have an equal counterpart for respectful conversational language by using "*po*" or "*opo*" at the terminal point of a word or sentence. Other respectful words during conversation in Filipino is the use of the plural word "*Kayo*" referring to "you" with respect.

Their major means of transportation is the train. All types of people in the society, rich, middle class or poor, educated or not, official or ordinary employee use the train for mass transport and bike. In this way, Japan is less congested with private cars. In the dialogue about "The train ride" (what time is the next hikari), it was observed that Japanese politely fall in line when they buy a ticket and when they ride on the train. In the Philippines, the train system is only used in Manila. In the province, commuters use tricycles for short distance travel while jeep and bus for long distance travel.

In preparing foods like obento for snacks or lunch, has its own uniqueness when wrapped with cloth. In the dialogue "How does it taste? And "Can you cook?" again the practice of humility was displayed. To the Japanese praising of one's own work like a delicious food prepared, is immodest or conceited, thus they will ask excuse (*sumimasen*) for not having prepared a good meal. If one ask a Japanese, "Can you cook?" at first there is denial though he is expert on it. For a Filipino just say "No, I can't", by replying directly like this. But Japanese reject in a more gentle and indirect way, trying to avoid direct refusal like, the use of "*chotto*" + *a reason*. Outright acceptance of one's expert skill is being arrogant, thus Japanese shall make excuse (*sumimasen heta desu*). If a Japanese is being praised with a work well done, he feels so ashamed, thus saying "*Domo arigato gozaimasta*" (*Thank you so much*) with a deep bow. Well, for Filipinos, telling the truth on the actual taste of the food prepared and accepting praise for one's good act is being practiced and acknowledged with the "thank you".

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Learning Japanese language is a very interesting experience with remarkable cultural practices embedded in the language. Interesting vocabulary learned and remembered are usually nouns, adjectives and friendly expressions for conversations but less on verbs. There were so many cultural practices admired by students as depicted in the dialogue, stories and videos. For them, learning Nihongo is embedded in the culture of the Japanese. There are some identified similarities or equivalent

words in Japanese to Filipino language however, the cultural practices and profound meanings in action have no perfect match.

Furthermore, this study highly recommends offering Nihongo classes to ABEL students with a teacher having studied the language and had lived experience of a Japanese culture. At the same time, the English Department shall have a strong linkage with some Japanese schools, universities or communities.

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