

Listen to the Learners: Views on Culture's Role in Language Learning from Exceptional Learners of Japanese

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Introduction

Even if they choose not to explicitly incorporate teaching of culture into their classrooms, most language teachers would agree that language and culture are inextricably connected. Language, after all, is our primary tool for socializing and communicating, and our social lives as well as countless episodes of communication happen within cultural contexts that delineate the contours of those activities. Language embodies our cultural reality, while it also expresses it and symbolizes it (Kramsch, 1998).

I am a teacher of English as a foreign language and, despite the undeniable connection between language and culture, most teachers of English are at least partly aware of the complexities and critical questions inevitably associated with attempts to introduce culture learning into our lessons. First and foremost, which culture or cultures should be taught? In the case of teaching English in Japan, do you choose to teach England's culture due to its role as the historical birthplace of the language? Or America's due to do that country's current global influence or perhaps its close alliance with post-war Japan? Maybe both? If so, what about Australia? Or Ireland or Scotland? And how about Singapore and India – two countries that are geographically much

closer to Japan than the others? Maybe you hope to introduce all of those cultures and other English-speaking ones (Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, etc.). If so, with all of that already on the agenda, is there any time left in the course for actual language teaching? And what about English's current standing as a global language? To what extent does this fact allow for a decoupling of the English language from particular cultures? If, for example, you are teaching Japanese adults whose goal is to use English to conduct business with their counterparts in China or southeast Asia, would it really be worthwhile to incorporate a cultural focus on English-speaking countries into those lessons? And what to do for the far more common teaching situation in which the English learners in your classroom are broadly mixed in terms of their language learning reasons and goals?

These sorts of questions persistently confront any English teacher who wants to bring culture into the classroom, and the answers are seldom straightforward. Moreover, the way we choose to answer them can sometimes reveal rarely examined attitudes and prejudices that, at times, uncomfortably echo the colonial origins of English's global spread (Pennycook, 2017; Crystal, 2003). Throughout my many years as an English teaching professional, discussions of the issue of culture's role in language learning have been wrapped in these complex questions, and so it was with some considerable relief that, in this study, I have been able to turn my attention away from English and onto Japanese. Unlike English, there is no dispute over the cultural "ownership" of the language and Japanese is far from achieving global language status, so the issue of which culture to teach is noticeably absent when it comes to teaching Japanese.

However, while it is mostly a blessing to not have to sift through a similar host of difficult questions in the case of Japanese, it is also in one sense a possible curse for teachers of Japanese. English teachers can point to the critical perspectives and inherent complexities of bringing culture into their classrooms in order to more or less avoid the issue since there are no clear answers or one-size-fits-all approaches. Japanese teachers, on the other hand, have nothing similar to problematize the issue. The relevant questions become more direct and unencumbered: Are you incorporating Japanese culture into your Japanese language lessons? If not, why not? Or if so, how and why and to what extent?

It seems to me that these are basic questions that every Japanese teacher has to struggle with. While I am certainly in no position to try to tell them how to answer such questions, the main purpose of this paper is to report on some hopefully useful experiences and anecdotes provided by a few successful learners of Japanese. And the interviewees in this study are no ordinary learners of Japanese. Each of them has achieved a level of Japanese language mastery that most of us in the foreign community in Japan can only marvel at, and they are all involved in language education to some degree so are more than capable of having a nuanced discussion of this topic and its pedagogical implications.

While approaching this topic of the role of culture in language learning, it becomes clear rather quickly that the sheer vastness of the term *culture* and its myriad implications can potentially be problematic. Most language teachers would concur that culture plays an important role in the language learning process, and yet, as Atkinson (1999) documented in an influential overview of the

topic, the nature of culture and what the term connotes is frequently disputed among language educators. Moran (2001) provides a useful rundown of the different ways that the term tends to be used and understood in various academic fields. This includes, for example, the tendency of intercultural educators and trainers to view it primarily as a general concept separate from any specific group or locale so that the framework can then be applied when analyzing specific instances of cross-cultural misunderstanding, critical incidents, and so on. In contrast, educators strongly influenced by Freire's (1973) critical pedagogy or working within areas of multicultural education tend to view culture as a more dynamic and fluid construct – something that emerges and evolves among groups or communities through interaction.

So, as an attempt to minimize the sort of confusion that could arise from this key term, at the beginning of each interview [and following Halverson (1985)] I tried to make it clear that we would be using the word *culture* in both its *big C* and *small c* senses. *Big C* refers to culture as civilization itself as reflected in the art and historical milestones and other great achievements of a particular society, whereas *small c* culture refers to the everyday customs and practices that most members of a particular society find themselves routinely immersed in. While *big C* culture tends to be easily recognizable by both insiders and outsiders of a society, the everyday practices of *small c* culture “have sedimented in the memories of group members who have experienced them firsthand” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 7) to the point that they are often mistakenly taken as natural (as opposed to culturally-learned) behavior. Having briefly discussed these two main uses of the term with each interviewee at the outset, the

subsequent flow of each interview tended to meander back and forth between these two meanings of *culture*.

Method

Interviewees

Three adult males, all fairly long-term residents of the Kansai area of Japan, were interviewed for this study. They are all extremely fluent users of Japanese. Henceforward they will be referred to by the following initials:

T: A British man who first came to Japan in 2008. He is a contract instructor of English at a university, and previously worked full-time in a number of Japanese high schools. T lives in Osaka and works in Kobe.

C: An American man who first arrived in Japan in 1985 and has been here ever since except for one brief episode. C works primarily as a professional translator, and lives between Osaka and Kobe. He usually works from home, but also teaches a couple of university courses one day per week.

H: An American man who first came to Japan in the fall of 1994, and has mostly been here ever since except for a couple of years in the early 2000s when he returned to the US for graduate school. H lives and works in Osaka and is a professor of English and linguistics.

Interview Procedure

The three participants were interviewed separately. Each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted roughly an hour. A set of nine questions (identified below as Q1 to Q9) were used to provide a common structure to the interviews, and the

interviewees all agreed to have their interviews recorded in order to make subsequent transcription possible.

Interviews

Q1: When did you start studying Japanese, and what attracted you to Japan or got you on the path to learning Japanese?

T: As a young child, T's mother arranged to have him tutored in French by a French neighbor and he could speak it quite well by the time he entered elementary school. He continued to study it through high school, when he also started to study German. Also, in his high school there was a Japanese student whose mother came in voluntarily to teach basic Japanese. The lessons were very informal and not for credit, but this constituted his first exposure to Japanese. Of this experience, however, T says that it was "not formative" and that "it could have been any language." He says he liked *anime* as a kid, but not so much that it became a motivating factor for learning Japanese.

Upon entering university, he again found some informal Japanese classes to participate in that were not part of his degree. He then moved to Japan directly after graduating because he was hired by the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. Thus, T never had any formal credit-bearing Japanese training before his arrival in this country. So what was T's motivation for becoming truly fluent in Japanese? He answered by saying, "really, it was born of necessity after arriving here. I saw that it was all around me, and I wanted it to not be a mystery to me anymore. I wanted to be conversant and literate."

After arrival as a JET and being placed in a high school in Osaka, T took advantage of JET's voluntary correspondence

courses for language learning. He quickly “burned through” the five levels offered, and afterwards also took supplementary courses available in interpretation and translation, as well as one in teaching Japanese. These included weekend seminar gatherings near Lake Biwa in Shiga which he says he really enjoyed.

T also spoke a lot about his self-study methods, mentioning the Heisig (2011) textbooks¹ and method of *kanji* learning as particularly helpful. He described his love of *kanji*, seeing them as a massive puzzle that he wanted to crack open. And he adds that “I really wanted to be able to read – recognizing how crippling it was to be illiterate.” Finally, T also described how he used the levels of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) as goal-setting benchmarks and a major source of motivation.

C: When C arrived back in 1985, he didn't speak Japanese and he had not experienced any formal study of the language. After a couple of years here, he was leaning toward staying in Japan long-term and so he realized that he would have to make real efforts to attain language proficiency. He then decided to attend YMCA intensive all-day classes for two years until he passed JPLT Level 1 in 1991. Of the YMCA program he says:

It was great because in the very beginning there were a few other English speakers but they fell away rather quickly. And after that it was all Asians except for me... so we had to communicate in Japanese in order to understand each other, which was great for me.

When he first came to Japan, C was doing some part-time English teaching at places like ECC but didn't have a clear goal

of what sort of work he wanted to do in his future. At first, he vaguely figured he'd stay in Japan for a few years and eventually head back to the USA to get a doctorate in literature. But he then happened to more or less stumble into his current translation job. Through a connected friend, a concert hall in Kobe asked him to translate some promotional materials. He gave it a try, and he did so well that his reputation as a translator grew by word of mouth. He has been a freelance translator ever since and, even though he has never had to advertise his services, he now has about 65 companies that he does translation work for. All the companies and institutions are connected to art and architecture in some way, and a number of them are located outside of Japan – including New York's Museum of Modern Art and the National Museum on Singapore, and several similarly renowned museums in Europe.

H: H says he has always enjoyed studying and learning languages, and he studied French and Spanish starting as a young child. Upon entering university he started studying Russian and wanted to take one additional language, but he was initially torn between Chinese and Japanese. He eventually chose Japanese and says he “absolutely loved” it from the start.

As a child he repeatedly participated in a rather unique experiential language learning program called Concordia Language Villages (CLV). These are popular summer camp experiences located in a forested rural area of northern Minnesota that are still offered today². Kids who join get to experience a weeks-long immersive learning experience in a language of their choice, and H joined the French village for three summers and the Spanish one for another two summers.

Having experienced the camps as a child, H says he knew he wanted to work there as a counselor as soon as he was old enough to do so. When he started university, he felt fluent enough in Spanish to work as a counselor, but there were no openings in that language for new counselors. Luckily, he says, he found out through his Japanese language teacher that CLV was starting up a new camp in Japanese. So, even though he was still in only his first year of studying Japanese himself, he applied and ended up getting hired as a Japanese camp counselor. Of this experience, H commented:

It was really fortuitous timing because, after that first year of studying Japanese, I immediately had a chance to use it -- to talk to actual Japanese people... it was the closest thing to actually being in Japan. And that really fueled my motivation.

He ended up continuing to work as a Japanese camp counselor for the following six summers, and H returned several times during the course of the interview to fondly recall what he experienced there and talk about how influential it was.

Q2: *On a scale from 1 to 10, where would you place your attraction to everyday culture (small c culture) in Japan, and why?*

T: T says that he would be a 9 or 10 on such a scale. He explains that “before I came, I knew nothing. I was a blank slate.” And he describes his first impression of Japanese everyday culture as “impenetrable” and “like a puzzle.” T added that:

It was all very opaque to me, and so different from what I was used to back in Britian, and that difference drew me in. In those first few years I would have been hard pressed to identify anything negative about being here. It took a few years for the shine to wear off... it took a little while for me to notice any cracks.

T stressed that the cultural opacity he experienced in his early years was not a negative factor. Instead. It spurred him to explore his surroundings. As T explained, “I would go and put myself in situations where there were no English speakers” as a means of forcing himself to confront and become familiar with the unknown.

Finally, T also mentioned how attracted he was to the natural landscapes he encountered, saying he was truly moved to see “how beautiful the countryside is. When I got to go to Koya-san and Nara and Shikoku... the beauty just blew me away.”

C: C also labels himself as a 10 in response to this question but explains that:

At first of course I was like ‘Oh wow I’m in Japan!’ every day, and then it got to be like this rollercoaster sort of thing with ups and downs, but eventually it just became normal to me – like, this is where I live.

While not using the terminology itself, C seems to be describing the positive variant of the widely known concept of the culture shock curve – after experiencing a long honeymoon phase, he landed gently in a more balanced state without ever

dipping too deeply into a negative phase. And although C is the oldest of the three interviewees in this study, he made a number of comments like the following which suggest that he has never let his curiosity about Japan wane:

I'm still finding out new things here every day. That's why I like teaching on the side – not so much university classes, but my older private students – I still learn all kinds of stuff every day from them.

Also, while chatting with C the topic of books and authors often arises. He is obviously well-read and frequently punctuates his comments with quotes or ideas from writers whom he admires, as in this instance when he refers to Donald Ritchie while making the point that long-term resident foreigners like him in Japan sometimes have a sort of cultural privilege:

Donald Ritchie said something like, for foreigners, “Japan is a great place because you can make your own world here.” That's really true. You exist outside of every kind of social structure... if you want to. But at the same time you can make great friends and you can get into that world too. You can come and go as you like, and you can kind of choose the things that you like and don't like about [everyday Japanese culture].

H: H explicitly brought up the culture shock curve, saying that he has definitely arrived at the relatively steady and balanced tail end of the curve. That is to say, he feels he experienced much of the euphoric positivity of the initial honeymoon phase, as well

as some of the negative feelings that tend to follow in the depressive phase, but he says he managed to not get stuck in either of those early phases as some people do. He feels he now has a balanced and realistic view of his adopted culture³. He described his current view of Japanese everyday culture in this way:

Now, you know, I'm very aware of things that bother me and things that I love. It's really mixed. And it's the same with how I feel about America – there are things that I love and that I hate. And usually what I tell people is one of the things I love about Japan is the sincerity and the courtesy, and one of the things I don't like is the lack of flexibility... the rigidity. But this is my home now, and so I don't really think of myself as being in a "different" culture any longer on a daily basis.

Q3: *On a scale from 1 to 10, where would you place your attraction to traditional or "high" culture (big C culture) in Japan, and why?*

T: T explained that through JET, he was able to do things like participate in an *ikebana* workshop. Also, through the high schools he was placed at, "a bunch of times" he was able to attend cultural activities that student groups put on, such as the tea ceremony. Of these experiences, T remarked:

It was fascinating to me and I went back again and again. But I wouldn't say it was especially motivating or drew me into it. It was the relationships with people that I really, really

enjoyed. Seeing my students, people I had come to know well, take part in them is what moved me.

Also, while he didn't single out any aspect of traditional culture that especially attracted him, T said that he doesn't recall ever turning down an invitation to experience something cultural. As he put it, "I had a totally open mind, I think. I was like, 'I'm up for anything!' Yeah... always ready to dive into the deep end."

C: C rates himself as a 10 on this scale as well. He says that he loved Japanese literature in translation and read a lot of it before he came. For example, he mentioned that he especially loved reading Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters*, as well as works by Mishima and Murakami. C also recalled that:

My mom gave me a copy of The Tale of Genji for Christmas one year. She was into all sorts of Japanese art and design. We had all sorts of Japanese stuff in my house... so there was always that influence.

At the same time, C made a point of stressing that he doesn't see himself as a cultural snob, and that even the aspects of Japanese culture which others might choose to turn away from appeal to him. As he put it:

On the other hand, I also love the slummy or gritty stuff too, like Shinsekai or Shinkaiichi – places like that too. And I like, you know, the high art stuff, but then I've always had an aversion to Kyoto too. I mean, I like Kyoto as a city, but I would never want to live there. I don't really like that kind of

closed... like the way that the foreign people are there and the Japanese too... I don't really like that. That's why this Kobe area seems like the best for me. The first time I came to Kobe I thought 'this is where I want to live.'

H: H hesitated for a while when answering this question, and then finally mentioned that the city he grew up in hosted an annual Festival of Nations and that he has fond memories of going there each year. He then said:

For me, there was always some fascination with foreign cultures... the artifacts and even the foods. But, for me, language was always primary. Coming to Japan was very much about wanting to improve my Japanese. You know I was interested and curious about the arts and so on, but almost everything for me was almost always language-driven. I just love it. I don't know why, but I just love the language – I would eat and drink it if I could.

Q4: *When you first arrived in Japan, what parts of Japanese culture intrigued you most and caused you to want to explore it more or learn more about it?*

T: In his response to this question, T spoke especially of his interest in the cultural differences observable in common social activities, focusing on public behaviors and mannerisms. He says that something about the way Japanese society functioned felt “weirdly harmonious and kind of antiquated,” and he was charmed by it. “Everything seemed to operate smoothly and quietly. This felt like the starkest difference to me compared to

where I was from.” His quest to understand these differences better – the desire to solve the cultural “puzzle” that he found himself in – helped fuel his daily efforts to study the language.

C: C’s answer to this question was quite specific and rather surprising: he was obsessed with Japanese *butoh* dance. He says he knew a bit about it before arriving, but he planned to further explore *butoh* once he got to Japan. (At this point he rattled off the names of various *butoh* dance troupes and individual dancers who were leading the movement at the time, demonstrating for me the depth of knowledge he had about a topic I knew almost nothing about.) C patiently explained how *butoh* was a contemporary dance movement born in the 1940s and 50s, and how its core physical movements were especially designed for the Japanese body, making it ironic that it is now more popular and practiced outside of Japan even though it wasn’t originally envisioned with foreigners in mind at all.

C explained that a troupe called *Byakkosha* was the only *butoh* group based in Kansai, and he often attended their performances. He eventually wrote to them in Japanese, even though his Japanese wasn’t so advanced at the time, in order to express how greatly he admired them and to offer his support in any way they might need. The leader of the group then replied that they were looking for volunteers, especially for translation and interpretation. So, although he lived in Sakai at the time, C says he got in the habit of taking the train to Kyoto every Friday evening to meet with the leader of that dance group and help him to reply to letters, interpret for his guests, and so on. His role as a volunteer assistant for the dance group grew and grew, until “eventually they even took me on their tour of Hong Kong with

them where I was their interpreter.” C went into further detail about his experiences with the troupe, both positive and negative, wrapping it up by saying, “that was a world that I really got into.”

Reflecting on that experience and how it impacted his language learning, C says that whenever foreigner friends ask him for advice about learning Japanese, he tells them to immerse themselves in Japanese culture in every way possible. He says that, for example, when he got his first smartphone, he deliberately chose one with a Japanese operating system in order to force himself to figure out how to use it without any English support. To further exemplify this “dive in” strategy, he said:

I know a lot of people like to search for English-speaking doctors and things like that, but I was like, ‘No!’ You get into these situations and you figure out how to communicate. Or you get with a girlfriend or boyfriend – at first, you don’t know how to fight in Japanese, or how to apologize in Japanese. But you figure it out, right? And that’s what it’s all about.

H: H basically says that at first every aspect of Japanese culture that he encountered fascinated him:

When I first arrived, my friends would tell me that I looked like a kid in a candy store. I was always saying ‘Hey! Look at that!’ or ‘Wow! What’s that?’ And I really was because... before I got to Japan I was just burning to get here. By the time I finally got here, experiencing Japanese culture directly and seeing everything with my own eyes was just like rocket fuel. My motivation level was really ramped up.

When pushed to name any aspect of traditional Japanese culture that especially fascinated him, H recalled participating in *shodo* for a few months, but concluded in this way:

I didn't gravitate to one single thing like some people do, because mastering the language was primary – that was my goal. and I didn't have an abiding interest in one particular thing like that. I have always been a dabbler – I like trying a lot of different things and having a variety of experiences.

H added that, for example, he read a lot of *manga* series and watched a lot of *anime* during those early years. But it was not because H loved *manga* and *anime* as themselves per se – he read and watched them because he knew they were great tools for studying colloquial Japanese.

Also, while answering this question, H echoed what C said about deliberately avoiding products and services that offered English support during those early years. The examples he gave included buying his first Mac desktop computer with a Japanese operating system even though English ones were available, and when buying a television he purposely searched for a model that did not have bilingual support just so that he wouldn't be tempted to watch programs in English.

Q5: *Currently is there any aspect of Japanese culture that is motivating you to learn the language more since you want to explore it further or understand it more deeply?*

T: In reply to this question, T said that “I don’t have any of those traditional hobbies.” And he went on to stress a point that he had previously made: “The thing that motivates me is relationships with people.” He explained that while of course he appreciates traditional cultural hobbies and so on, for him, “culture is basically an excuse to hang out with people.”

T then talked about his current involvement in a type of yoga known as *acro-yoga*. He said that he practices it regularly and has a close-knit group of Japanese friends with whom he does it and that they put on workshops and demonstrations together. T explained that his involvement in that group has been good for strengthening his Japanese since it has pushed him to learn new vocabulary that he realized he needed (e.g., descriptors for body movements, degrees of physical exertion) in order to conduct his *acro-yoga* workshops. So, while he can’t claim that *acro-yoga* is a part of Japanese traditional culture, he feels that any activity that one feels enthused enough about to get involved in and eager to share it with others while living here in Japan will lead to measurable language gains.

C: C said that he can’t really identify anything in particular at the moment, but this is perhaps understandable since the content of his job itself already serves to immerse him daily in the world of Japanese traditional and contemporary art. As he put it:

Part of it is because I translate so much, so I hardly ever feel like I want to read Japanese in my free time. Occasionally I get on a movie kick and watch a bunch of Japanese films – they tend to be very old ones. I’m always open to whatever, and of course with art I’m always going to museums and

galleries, and if I find some art that is really interesting then I pay special attention to it.

H: After mulling the question for a while, H also said there is nothing that stands out as particularly motivating these days. He repeated the idea that language acquisition has always been his primary source of motivation, and that this necessarily makes all aspects of Japanese culture that he encounters interesting to him, even if he isn't pursuing something in particular at the moment.

Q6: In your classroom experiences of learning Japanese, do you recall your teachers incorporating anything about Japanese culture into their lessons? Such as? How did you feel about it?

T: The only formal classroom learning experience of Japanese that T has had was a brief stint at a YWCA language school in Osaka. Of that course, he said, "It was very much rote learning. Worksheets and drills. Chalk and talk." There was no attempt that he can remember to explicitly incorporate culture learning into those lessons. He also mentioned that his JET correspondence classes brought in more role-playing activities and so on when they met in person, but those courses were not really focused on culture either in any clearly demonstrable way.

Thinking back to his first Japanese exposure, he recalled that the Japanese mother who taught informal lessons at his high school used lots of songs and nursery rhymes, and he enjoyed that. And when pressed about whether he would have liked to have had more culture learning opportunities in his subsequent Japanese courses, T replied that he didn't really think about it at the time because:

I was simply looking for something effective to improve my Japanese... and if the activities they had used had been cultural in nature, and they were effective, then I would have enjoyed them. I would have felt, 'that's good,' if I felt they were helping me to meet my language learning goals.

Considering the topic further, T went on to say that culture is always present in any language lesson, even if lurking in the background, since it is implicit in the dialogues and so on of any sort of effective learning materials. He concluded by saying:

Culture contextualizes the language learning. It gives you a framework for understanding... I think it's impossible to separate language and culture, but that's not to say language learning has to be explicitly about culture.

C: As for C, elements of culture learning did apparently occur with some frequency in his YMCA courses:

We had different teachers each day of the week, and it really depended on the person teaching. But it was back in the day before Japanese teaching qualifications were really needed for that sort of job. So, some were quite good at explaining Japanese culture and others were awful and obviously not so familiar with certain aspects of their own culture.

He added that a number of his Asian classmates, especially the Chinese, were quick to challenge the teachers and question them on aspects of Japanese culture that befuddled them, and this

led to some useful impromptu cultural discussions in class. He also mentioned that a lot of movies were shown in that program (e.g., *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*) not only for the dialog practice they provided, but also as a sort of culturally meaningful break from the intensity of the language learning. As a textbook, the program used high school readers that were actually intended for Japanese students, so the language learning was quite deeply embedded in its cultural context. In other words, it generally wasn't the sort of decontextualized drill approach to language learning.

H: H said that culture was not generally integrated into the courses he took in a major way, but he has positive memories of his teachers informally making efforts to help him appreciate Japanese culture. For example, the teacher of his first Japanese course took all of her students out to dinner at the only sushi restaurant at that time in his city, and that made a big impression on him.

He also said the classroom textbook materials for a Japanese course he took in his third year of study were entirely based on a drama series (*Tonari no Shibafu*) that they watched from start to finish. And while the main focus of the materials was linguistic and not overtly about culture, using a television drama in this way to contextualize the language being studied and make it seem living and real to students does of course bring the target culture into the learning experience implicitly.

Finally, H recounted a particular incident that stuck with him. The same teacher in his first year who had taken him to a Japanese restaurant was well connected in the local Japanese artistic community, and she invited a *noh* performer to visit the class and demonstrate. H says that he was sitting just a few feet

away from the performer and his *tsuzumi* drum, and when he started singing and beating the drum it came as a shock because the sounds were not at all like H had expected. The teacher had only prepared them by saying that the performer “sings and drums,” but unsurprisingly the *noh* demonstration did not at all fit into H’s (at that time) limited preconceptions of what the terms *singing* and *drumming* imply. Of the incident, he said:

A lot of students were trying hard not to laugh because it was like so... exotic. We didn't want to be rude, but it was shocking. We weren't expecting anything like that. I still remember trying my best to hold back laughter.

Notably, he concluded that story by saying that the teacher followed up by offering cassette tapes of the music that was performed, and he took one home with him and remembers listening to it while doing his Japanese homework. He says he also used to prepare green tea and incense to go along with the *noh* music to create an atmosphere conducive to Japanese study and that, even though he now feels a bit embarrassed to recall how superficially stereotypical his image of Japanese culture was, he does feel that making those little efforts to mimic a target cultural environment are helpful for language study.

Q7: Did you have any memorable disappointments or other negative experiences in your attempts to learn about or experience aspects of Japanese culture?

T: After pausing to consider the question for a while, T finally answered in this way:

Trying to understand some of the social behaviors and not being able to discover the underlying logic. For example, why am I not allowed to eat an apple while I walk without people looking at me as if I'm doing something wrong?... I felt that sort of thing frustrating after the initial honeymoon period wore off.

Additionally, he then pointed to a sort of complacency that he feels may be inherent in the culture as another source of disappointment:

The lack of ability to explain reasons why things are done the way they are. And just going with 'because that's the way things have always been done.' And the attitude that you can be satisfied with that as a way of being. Relatedly, the lack of willingness to change, or to contemplate the possibility that things could be other than the way that they are... that today is still an endless source of frustration.

C: To answer this question, C spoke of the visa conditions when he first arrived in Japan (mid 1980s), and explained that when he started working at ECC they couldn't give him a work visa at first but they set him up with a tea ceremony teacher so that he could stay in Japan on a culture visa. The woman was very nice and told C that temperamentally he was perfect for the tea ceremony. But despite being encouraged in this way, he said that the layers of unexplained rules for how things must be done were frustrating to him and he felt resistance to it. He later abandoned the tea ceremony and moved on to *ikebana* training in

order to continue to qualify for a culture visa, and he said that it was an improvement but still ultimately frustrating, suggesting that his reaction was perhaps at least partly due to the reason that he had to try to learn these aspects of traditional culture. That is to say, he didn't choose to pursue these things on his own, but instead felt coerced to do so in order to maintain his visa status.

C then added that his resistance was also likely due to his maturity level at the time:

I guess partly it was just the fact that I was so much younger. If I did it now, I would be more accepting of it. I mean, I was coming from punk rock and everything. I was very interested in Japan, but... rules? Not so much.

When it comes to everyday Japanese culture, without getting into specifics of what disappoints him, C again cited the relative independence that his career affords him as sheltering him from what might otherwise be unpleasant social interactions. As he put it, “Even though there are some social behaviors that I may not like, they hardly affect me since I work mostly independently. I don't really have to answer to anybody.”

H: After pondering the question for a bit, H said that nothing really stands out in his mind. He mentioned that he recalls going to *kabuki* and *noh* performances and not understanding what was happening at all on stage, but still enjoying the experience. He says that even though translations through earphone sets were available at those performances, he usually chose not to use them because he preferred to hear it in Japanese even when he didn't understand it. He mentioned being especially moved by

experiencing Takigi Noh – an outdoor performance lit by torches. H concluded by adding that “I never remember feeling any negative feelings or frustration when I experience things like that. None that I can think of... even when I don't fully understand what is going on.”

Q8: Are there any aspects of Japanese culture which you now wish you had a better understanding of earlier since you believe having that knowledge could have positively influenced your language learning?

T: To answer this question, T again brought up what he perceives as the Japanese tendency to more or less accept their surroundings as self-evident and the lack of interest in digging deeper or explaining why things are the way they are. He expressed it in this way:

While still frustrated by it at times, I've come to realize that there is something kind of appealing about their certainty here. If I had come to terms with that earlier, I would have probably been even more motivated to continue on with the language learning.

C: C paused for a rather long time before offering an answer. Eventually he brought up the formality of *keigo* and suggested that he would have liked to have had “a better understanding of *keigo* and things like that which make sense after you become fluent in the language but, before that, just seem silly.”

Also, C went on to discuss what he calls “the grey element” of Japanese society and the vagueness built into the language itself

(e.g., the linguistic flexibility of dropping the subject). He said he noticed early on how you don't really need to explicitly express your intentions in Japanese, and that society here seems generally comfortable with such vagueness of expression. He described how his reaction to this phenomenon has evolved:

In the early days, I was like, 'Wait, what's going on?' But then, as time went along, I was like, 'This is wonderful! I love grey! I want to live in the grey!' I mean, why should we have to specify, you know? Do what you want. And so now I feel like it's a gift. It's really something wonderful.

H: H explained that he doesn't really have an answer for this question because he feels that he had so thoroughly prepared himself to experience Japan and Japanese culture before arriving here, and he again credited his summer camp experiences as being helpful in this regard. As he put it:

In my case, unlike a lot of foreigners who come to Japan, I feel like I was really well prepped – 4 years of courses and six years of CLV camps. I had read a lot of books on Japanese culture and had had a lot of discussions. Experiencing it is different from reading about it. And there were things, like experiencing some of the rigidity in thinking style... or like getting used to honne and tatemae, and the idea of a gap between what Japanese might do and say because of it... but I was able to experience that with my Japanese co-workers at those camps before I even came to Japan.

Q9: *Do you have any advice for Japanese language teachers who may be searching for effective ways to insert a greater focus on culture into their language lessons?*

T: T replied to this question with an essentially student-centered approach, saying that the students' own needs and interests ought to determine the sort of culture learning that happens within language instruction. In his words:

Ask your students what aspects of Japanese culture they want to learn more about, and then work that into your lesson... Make it student-centered, as opposed to bringing in your own preconceptions about what sort of culture learning is important.

C: In contrast to T, C seems to think that many students might not yet have had enough of the sort of self-directed experiences of cultural exposure that would allow them to inform the teacher about the sort of cultural learning they really want to pursue. So, he suggested that Japanese teachers bring cultural artifacts into the classroom more – songs, movies, books – and especially unusual things that students likely wouldn't find on their own. He then mentioned the example of print media, which he says he has always loved:

Even before I could really read Japanese, I always went to the bookstore. Always! I always looked for weird looking books and magazines. Then I would find something I like and buy it. And just by looking through it I knew that this is something that I want to know about. I mean, I could feel it. But not

everyone is like that, right? Obviously not everybody is hungry like that. So I think introducing those things, calling those things to people's attention is very important. I mean, it's partly because everybody has something different that would cause them to feel awed. The kind of music that people like is different and all that. So students need exposure to all sorts of things.

H: After thinking over the question, H eventually mentioned that the teacher could possibly try to give anecdotes in class that connect culture to language, and maybe give cultural demonstrations in class if they have personal experience with suitable traditions, or perhaps organize voluntary field trips. But overall he seems more ambivalent about the role of culture in the classroom, perhaps because he feels that successful learners are going to naturally find ways to pursue their cultural interests on their own as a way of broadening their exposure to the language, as he did. He concluded with this:

I don't know if there is a right way to do it. I think that there are different styles of teachers and learners. In my own case, again, I was so linguistic-driven. I mean, the cultural stuff was interesting, but for me it was more peripheral... and it didn't really change my motivation significantly. But everybody's different. For some learners, culture is probably the more powerful motivator. It could go either way, I guess.

Discussion and Conclusion

The content of the three interviews mostly speaks for itself, and readers will surely draw their own conclusions. I will offer

just a few comments on some of the points that stood out for me during the course of the interviews and while reviewing them.

C came across to me as the quintessential example of someone whose deep interest in a particular foreign culture motivates him to master the associated language. On the other hand, H is almost the polar opposite to C: He is the type who is so driven to master the language from the outset that he willingly participates in whatever cultural activities he comes across since he naturally views them as helpful for attaining his ultimate goal of linguistic mastery. T seems to lie somewhere between these two extremes, but perhaps closer to H than to C since, for example, he describes cultural experiences as essentially a tool for increasing and deepening social interactions – communication and relationships are what most motivate him. Both T and H recounted their Japanese self-study procedures and habits at length and in detail. And their voices were quite animated while doing so, suggesting that the topic of the language itself and how to master it still fascinates them.

Even if the three interviewees differ from each other in terms of what most motivates them to master Japanese, it seems to me that temperamentally they share something extremely important: namely, deep curiosity and a proactive attitude that pushes them to explore whatever intrigues them without hesitation. All of them spoke of how they tended to just throw themselves into social and cultural situations in which they'd have to use Japanese, even if linguistically they probably weren't quite ready to fully handle those situations. This "sink or swim" attitude no doubt caused occasional hardship, but ultimately it pushed them to attain fluency quickly while also strengthening their familiarity with Japanese culture. There was very little mention of regrets or

missed opportunities during the interviews because, it seemed clear to me, none of them were the type to hesitate to get involved when presented with opportunities. And, as exemplified by C writing a letter to a *butoh* master, or H applying to be a Japanese camp counselor after only one year of studying Japanese, or T deciding to voluntarily lead acro-yoga workshops in Japanese; these three people are the type who create their own opportunities rather than just wait for something to come along.

Another interesting common point among the interviewees that struck me was that they all received encouragement from family at an early age to somehow get involved in foreign languages and cultures. T spoke of his mother arranging for a neighbor to teach him French before elementary school, C recalled his mother decorating their home with Japanese artifacts and giving him a classic Japanese text for his birthday, and H's parents sent him to a summer camp for the purpose of language and culture immersion – a decision that clearly has had a major impact on his life's trajectory. For all of them, their seemingly innate openness to and curiosity about Japanese language and culture may be at least partly due to supportive parents exposing them to meaningful contact with foreign cultures from a very young age.

Finally, the last question of the interview is perhaps of greatest interest to teachers of Japanese, and thus deserves more attention. The replies of the three interviewees do not align with each other in any obvious way, so what practical advice might a teacher glean from them? T and C seem to contradict each other, but perhaps the point to take away from their comments is to combine both of their approaches to introducing culture into the classroom. That is to say, it makes sense to survey students and

get their input about what aspects of culture they want to learn more about, while also making a point of occasionally exposing them to the sort of cultural performances, experiences, and artifacts that they are unlikely to discover on their own. And H's seemingly ambivalent opinion about the role of culture in the language classroom is also important to keep in mind. As H mentioned many times in his interview, his motivation was completely derived from his desire to master the language, and so he embraced anything which supported that goal while treating anything that did not as peripheral. The connection between culture learning and language acquisition may seem obvious to most teachers of language, but it is up to the teachers to make that connection explicit to students. So, when elements of the target culture are being introduced and experienced as part of the course, teachers would be wise to clearly situate them within the course's language learning objectives. This involves, for example, preparing for the cultural activities by focusing on the sort of vocabulary and other linguistic features that will help students to better appreciate what they will experience, and afterwards reflecting with students about the meaning of each cultural experience or activity and how it connects to and supports their language learning efforts.

Notes

1. H also mentioned these Heisig (2011) textbooks by name, echoing T in claiming that it was his most useful tool for *kanji* self-study.
2. Further information about the Concordia Language Villages and the various language immersion camps that it offers is available on its website: www.concordialanguagevillages.org

3. Notice that unlike T and C, H didn't actually place himself on the numerical scale that I mentioned in the question. As the interviewer in this qualitative study, I was mainly using the questions as prompts to stimulate worthwhile discussion rather than as strict parameters for collecting a certain type of data, so I didn't try to insist on a number. For the next question as well, neither T nor H provided a number despite a similarly phrased question.

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