

# The Function of Extracurricular Cultural Activities in Teaching Japanese

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## Introduction

In this study, I explore the function of cultural activities outside of language class at a small private university. Since the American Council on Education advocated the importance of education to develop youth's intercultural competence at a university or college level (AEC 1995) and the National Standards established the direction of how languages should be taught and learned (National Standards 1999), culture has been integrated into curriculums of foreign language courses. However, the method of implementation varies in each program based on the teaching philosophy.

The Japanese program at the University of Findlay (UF) organizes Japanese cultural activities outside of class. Although it was neither stipulated nor intended, we offered those activities once a month on average during the semesters from fall 2017 to fall 2020. We support these activities with the belief that our students learn and develop intercultural competence through them. It takes time and effort to prepare for the activities, especially because we ask for our students' active involvement in preparation and implementation. UF is not the only school to provide opportunities to experience a target culture. However, there seems to be not much research on the effectiveness of fun cultural activities on students' development of intercultural

competency. I will discuss possible benefits language learners can have through those activities.

### **Culture and Foreign Language Classes**

Existing studies show that teachers of foreign languages have sought and experimented with several effective approaches of embedding culture in their classes. Klak and Martin (2003) studied the effectiveness of a series of school-wide international cultural events at Miami University. They examined those events that influenced the change in the participants' intercultural attitudes and the development of their intercultural sensitivity. They discussed what they found to be a successful model at a large school which was a series of across-the-school cultural events. When those events were interdisciplinary, it created an atmosphere that promoted discussion. Also, if a variety of events about one culture was offered, it gave students options to attend one that fit their intercultural standpoints. López-Burton (2014) described methods of teaching culture in foreign language classes that help break stereotypes that students exhibit toward the target culture. The methods are designed to make the students "culturally proficient." In a paper published in 2002, Chavez discussed both successful and unsuccessful methods of introducing foreign cultures to students. Her students began to understand that the knowledge of foreign-language culture can be an advantage in real life, but their ways of seeing foreign-language culture have some discrepancies from the ones the National Standards suggests. Her students pointed out "the subjectivity of cultural descriptions, the constantly changing nature of culture, and most fundamentally, the questionable notion of a national culture" (Chavez, 2002, pp. 136-137). The

students' questions in Chavez's study support the critique of the National Standards introduced by Kubota (2003). She warns that culture can be taught in a manner that ignores diversity in a culture, simplifies culture too much, and as a result, gives learners stereotypic ideas. These arguments and critiques made it clear that the goal of teaching a target culture is to give the learners a grasp of everyday life rather than only of festivals and ancient traditions. It can be easy to introduce and cook simple Japanese food, but that is only a tiny piece of Japanese culture. It is harder to give a student a grasp of the variations in traditions within urban and rural populations, northern and southern populations, and coastal and inland populations, as well as among different generations and ethnic minorities (Kubota, 2003). The UF program attempts to take into consideration all of these critiques when having activities organized around meeting Japanese exchange students and visitors from Japan.

### **Short-term Study Abroad Programs in Japan**

Studies on short-term study abroad programs in Japan elucidate the importance of experiential opportunities within Japanese culture. Abe, Kamabuchi, Yoshikane, and Ryu (2015) offered lectures on diverse cultural topics such as Yuzen-dyeing and Japanese confectionery making, as well as immersive social interactions to facilitate the growth of the participants' interest in Japanese culture. In their Japanese program, Arai, Kitani, and Takagishi (2017) included a field trip to a business to allow participants to observe a Japanese work environment. Morikawa (2019) had the opportunity to introduce her international students to Japanese university students of *Noh*, classical Japanese theater, and *Sado*, the traditional Japanese tea ceremony. These Japanese

students will one day be masters of one of these disciplines. She observed that the interaction with peers was as beneficial as the exposure to cultural concepts. Seeing the value placed on these traditions by the Japanese students deepened the international students' understanding and appreciation of Japanese culture. While each of the authors presented different experiences to the students, they shared the same goal—to allow language learners to observe the culture, understand it experientially, and analyze it.

### **Japanese Cultural Activities**

In order to improve students' foreign language ability, it is important to equip them with flexibility, curiosity, and interest in the target culture. Thus, the Japanese program at UF teaches Japanese language and culture by utilizing the presence of Japanese exchange students and Japanese participants in short-term programs in the school environment. For example, my colleague, Dr. Hiroaki Kawamura, creates a linguistic analytic opportunity for third and fourth-year Japanese language students to observe verbal and non-verbal communication by applying an ethnography approach. He gives his students assignments to observe and listen to the Japanese participants and to analyze both the verbal and the non-verbal content of their communication. The students receive a follow-up session to practice phrases for use in certain contexts and to discuss new contexts.

Table 1 shows activities that UF Japanese language learners participated in from August 2017 to August 2020. In these activities and events, the Japanese language learners had hands-on sessions to experience Japanese culture or to work with Japanese exchange students and other Japanese visitors.

Table 1. Japanese Cultural Activities at UF from August 2017 to August 2020

August	UF-Kake Ambassador Program (2017, 2018, 2019) <i>Rajio taisoo</i> [Radio exercise] (2020)
September	Getting to Know Each Other Gathering [to connect Japanese program students and Japanese students] (2017, 2018)
October	Travel the Globe (2017) <i>Japafesu</i> [Japanese Festival for high school students' campus visit] (2018) <i>Rakugo</i> [Japanese traditional story telling] Workshop (2017, 2019) <i>Koto</i> [Japanese harp] performance reception (2019)
November	Fukui/Findlay International Business Training Seminar (2017, 2018, 2019)
December	Japanese Program Farewell Party (2017, 2018, 2019)
January	New Year Party at UF (2018, 2019, 2020) New Year Party at Japanese Saturday School in Toledo (2018)
February	Fukui Prefectural University Nursing Study Tour Program (2018, 2019, 2020) <i>Taiko</i> Workshop as one of "Japan in Findlay Week" events (2018) Cooking (2019, 2020)
March	UF-Eisu Gakkan High School Program (2018, 2019) Rakuno Gakuen University Students Visit (2018, 2019) UF International Night (2018, 2019)

April	Japanese Program Farewell Party (2018, 2019) <i>Arigatoo no Kai</i> [A gathering organized by Japanese mothers in Findlay to show appreciation to their children’s teachers] (2018, 2019)
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Walker and Noda (2000) take a hands-on approach to learn both the language and the culture through performance. Their view is that the students need to perform and act in cultural and social situations. They discuss how the students can learn how to use *Ohayoo gozaimasu* and *Ohayoo* (both meaning “Good morning.”) along with appropriate gestures: bowing, nodding, or waving a hand, by paying attention to “specified times, places, roles, scripts, and audiences” (p. 189). In another performance, students learn the different meanings of *Iidesu* (“That’s good.” or “No, thank you.”) in cultural contexts and with non-verbal expressions. Kawamura (2018) suggests that learning through performance will develop the students’ ability to actively observe verbal and non-verbal communications and practice them. Will enjoyable cultural activities possibly be opportunities for language learners to observe culture and learn appropriate behaviors?

## Examples of Two Cultural Activities

### ***Shodo (Japanese calligraphy)***

*Shodo* is one of the most popular activities among Japanese language learners. They enjoy using a brush to write exotic characters in ink. However, Noda (1994) argues that without a context, the activity will merely be a pointless exercise. Noda suggests that if the instructor can establish a plausible context for

the learners to formulate a schema, *shodo* will become an authentic activity. One of the occasions where the Japanese use calligraphy is when they write a New Year's resolution. The ceremonial use of ink and brush makes the action of writing a New Year's resolution special and shows the person's determination to follow the resolution. The activity, *kakizome* (writing a New Year's resolution in calligraphy), matches with one's unique feeling of the biggest holiday in Japan. Because going to shrines and temples during the New Year's holiday is one of the major activities of the season, New Year's resolutions are imbued with a sense of the sacred. Thus, at UF, we make sure to include this activity when we have our New Year's party with Japanese language learners and Japanese exchange students. Bennett (2004, p. 74) proposes that:

The crux of intercultural adaptation is the ability to have an alternative cultural experience. Individuals who have received largely monocultural socialization normally have access only to their own *cultural worldview*, so they are unable to experience the difference between their own perception and that of people who are culturally different.

A New Year's resolution is something with which most people in the U.S. are familiar, but calligraphy in the context of New Year's celebration and the culture behind it may be a new experience for them. It is a meaningful opportunity for Japanese language learners to see something which they share in common from a different cultural perspective. With this perspective, Japanese language learners will have an opportunity to observe and develop sensitivity to understand that making a New Year's resolution can be a solemn activity in Japan.

This calligraphy activity also helps language learners realize that not all Japanese are alike. They watch some Japanese participants struggle with writing with a brush and ink. It is true that some Japanese are good at calligraphy, but others are not. The students may talk about the fact that some of their Japanese friends have never written a New Year's resolution in calligraphy. Advanced language learners can observe how a dialogue of giving and receiving complements on writing skills between Japanese speakers takes place. There was actually a Japanese student growing up in a family that did not go to shrines or temples on the New Year's holidays. The presence of native Japanese speakers changes this activity from an arts and crafts demonstration to a cultural opportunity. It also prevents the reinforcement of stereotypes and shows diversity in Japanese culture.

### **Rajio taisoo (*Radio exercise*)**

In the fall of 2020, a Japanese radio exercise was introduced to develop our students' intercultural competency. Due to the pandemic, we did not have any Japanese exchange students or visitors during the semester. Thus, we had to improvise. In order to provide an authentic experience, the Japanese language learners were given a context within which to perform the task. When radio was introduced in Japan, one of the cultural traditions that arose was to exercise under the direction of coaches on radio programs. This has become a backbone of Japanese physical fitness exercising. While the radio is no longer the prime source of group exercise, the Japanese still refer to group exercise in their daily life as radio exercise. To provide the context, videos of different groups engaging in radio exercise are shown to the



students. The groups who are of different ages, gender, social class, and including non-Japanese perform different types of exercises. The common characteristic of the different groups is that they perform in synchrony. If the students do not understand the cultural meaning, simply having them do the activity would be pointless. Once the student can understand the place that exercise has within social fabric of Japanese life, they can integrate it into their cultural competency. If they accept this tradition, they are more likely to be sensitive to other customs they may encounter.

For instance, Kriska (2011), who was the first American woman to work at the Honda headquarters in Japan, reflected on her experiences at the factory. “Exercise music played over the loudspeaker and everyone stretched, even the women” (p. 212). Kriska participated in the group activity, and it was obvious that she had developed intercultural competency.

According to Kim, “one’s skill in facilitating successful intercultural communication outcomes in terms of satisfaction and other positive assessments of the interaction and the interaction partner” (Kim, 2005 in Jandt, 2013, p. 35) is key to developing competence. Given that definition, the first step of intercultural communication is to make friends with people who have different cultural backgrounds. When a Japanese language student goes to Japan and encounters a situation where he or she is invited to try the radio exercise, he or she should participate without denial or hesitation. If they can perform moderately well, the Japanese will feel complimented. Knowledge and experience like this will help language learners enter the society and to start establishing relationships with the people.

## Conclusion

Cultural activities can be more than just fun. They can become opportunities for language learners to interact with Japanese people, perform their knowledge in context, and observe possible appropriate verbal and non-verbal communications in their target language and culture. The Japanese program at UF has a teaching philosophy that Japanese language learning will continue after the students graduate. Therefore, we need to equip students with the ability to enter Japanese society and build relationships with Japanese people so that they can learn through new experiences. We offer cultural activities with the belief that those opportunities become their rehearsals for reality.

To make the most of the activities, we need to pursue more effective ways of implementation. In the future, we will be holding discussion sessions after activities with the language learners. It will also be useful to give follow-up surveys to alumni. The current method of conducting the activities will develop the intercultural competence of students who already have cultural sensitivity, but it may leave others only focused on the enjoyable aspects of the activities.

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