



Reconsidering 'Culture' in Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language: Towards Better Intercultural Communication

Dr Nobumi Kobayashi¹

¹SMAB, The UK

Abstract

Culture is considered vital in understanding language, as it shapes how we communicate [3]. Yet in Japanese language education, culture has been treated as problematic and has not been incorporated to aid learners. The existing body of literature frames culture as a political issue: something to be managed rather than a key to understanding the language [4]. The concern has been "essentialist" representations of Japanese culture, revolving around nihonjinron as a nationalistic construct. Here, they treat language as the medium for such narratives and argue for moving "beyond stereotypes" toward diversity and globalisation. The main problem is the standardised language taught under the Japanese Language Proficiency Test at the elementary level. This variety is culturally European, essentially a written form constructed through significant grammatical borrowing from English in the 19th–20th centuries [6]. The grammar-driven approach exacerbates the problem, since the grammar itself has been 'Europeanised', leaving little room for Japanese culture. This paper maintains that the system does not support most learners who wish to speak and understand spoken Japanese and suggests the use of authentic materials. Everyday Japanese relies on features unexplained by Western grammar, including incomplete sentences and sentence-final particles, whose meanings are inseparable from cultural values. Drawing on historical documentary research and textual analysis of transcripts from short videos and anime, it highlights differences between formal Japanese taught and the language Japanese people use. Treating language itself as a cultural artefact, it shows that only by observing language in use can we grasp the cultural patterns that grammar alone cannot explain.

Keywords: authentic materials; spoken Japanese; Europeanisation of language and grammar; language as cultural artefact

1. Introduction

Culture is not an optional backdrop to language education but central to promoting better intercultural communication by fostering empathy, understanding, and appreciation for different perspectives [1], [2], [3]. Yet, in Japanese language education, culture has often been treated as problematic, something to be managed rather than a tool for helping learners [4]. The critical literature has focused on the issues of "ethnocentric" and "essentialist" portrayals of Japanese identity, reflected in the standardised language in JFL pedagogy and argued for an alternative representation suitable for a more diverse and globalised society. While valuable, this body of work has overlooked a deeper issue: the very form of Japanese institutionalised in JFL.

As I argued elsewhere [5], the standardised variety taught under the JLPT system is not simply culturally "Japanese," but a Europeanised written language constructed by Meiji-era reforms and "grammatical borrowing" from English [6],[7]. It is a product of modernity's rationalising and self-Orientalising logic, reinforced through institutionalisation, which is almost devoid of the core characteristics of spoken Japanese. This paper addresses that gap by treating language itself as a cultural artefact, whose "biography" can be reconstructed through a historical relational approach (Appadurai [8]; Kopytoff [9]; Latour [10]; Callon [11]; Bourdieu [12]).

Building on this theoretical framework, I introduce my own Cultural Input Method™, which shifts focus from grammar-driven teaching to authentic materials—anime, commercials, YouTube—that capture



how Japanese is actually spoken. Unlike grammar-centred methods, this approach can instantaneously create an immersive environment, in which learners can experience cultural patterns, interactional cues, and situational appropriateness, equipping them with "capacity" for real intercultural communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture and Language

Culture is an integral part of language learning, which has been well recognised across disciplines. In fact, many have argued that culture and language are inseparable from this perspective. Sociologist Raymond Williams, who was better known as a cultural theorist, described culture as "a whole way of life," highlighting that it encompasses everyday practices, meanings, and symbolic systems [1]. Complementing Williams' conceptualisation and further developing it, Edward Hall, an anthropologist and the advocate of intercultural communication, defined culture as a communication system, introducing the concepts of high-context and low-context cultures [2]. In high-context cultures, primarily found in Asian and African nations, such as Japan, communication relies heavily on shared knowledge, non-verbal cues and situational context rather than explicit verbalisation. Claire Kramsch, a multilingual and multicultural linguist and language teacher, takes both their ideas and extends them into pedagogy. She vehemently argued that culture is not "an expendable fifth skill" in language learning, but totally indispensable [3], as it shapes how meanings are produced and interpreted in interaction.

Their arguments, albeit from varying perspectives, clearly demonstrate that culture cannot be ignored in conducting effective intercultural communication, which should be the main aim in language learning. Yet, within language education, the focus is often on memorising grammar points, commonly used expressions and vocabulary. The problem is that most learners do not realise that without knowledge of culture, as defined by Williams, Hall and Kramsch, they cannot even begin to use any of the words or expressions which they have painstakingly learnt. For learners of Japanese, which is a non-European and high-context language, not understanding Japanese culture is detrimental. Yet, within JFL education, 'culture' has become a dirty word, and teachers have struggled to operationalise this insight, which presents unique challenges for learners.

2.2 Critical Perspectives on Culture in JFL

In Japanese language education, there are regional variations in how scholars view the treatment of culture in JFL. US-based scholars, including Matsumoto and Okamoto [4], Tai [13], and Doerr [14], consider "ethnocentric" and "essentialist" narratives in JFL education problematic, echoing popular American academic debates of the period. They argue that such narratives often portray Japanese culture as homogeneous, characterising Japanese speakers in essentialist terms as "polite, humble, and indirect" [4]. Following this, they view the standardisation of Japanese as particularly problematic and advocate diversity by including dialects.

Japan-based scholars also exhibited similar tendencies, as they do not treat culture as integral to language learning. Instead, they framed debates about culture in JFL in terms of "international understanding education" and "multicultural coexistence" [15], reflecting demographic pressures such as the need to integrate non-Japanese residents amid a declining birth rate. Accordingly, Terao [16] notes that "culture" in JFL is often reduced to safe, surface-level content. Notably, Truong Thuy Lan's description of the treatment of culture in Japanese education in Vietnam, which represents the largest share of Japan's foreign workforce, reinforces this tendency as it shows how textbooks and teaching focus on festivals, sightseeing, and simple lifestyle topics rather than communicative practices [17].

These accounts confirm that, whether in Anglophone or Japan-based discussions, "culture" tends to be presented not as integral to language learning, which does not show learners how cultural patterns shape language use. This is the gap I address: the standardised Japanese institutionalised through the JLPT, which I call Esperanto Japanese. It is closer to a historically constructed written language.



As such, it offers grammatically correct language, but it mostly lacks core cultural characteristics found in the spoken variety used in everyday speech.

2.3 Broader Academic Context

However, the problem appears to be that these authors have been distracted by situating their arguments within the dominant intellectual discourse, forgetting the role of culture in language education.

In the early 2000s, *essentialism* became a key term in US-based scholarship, frequently deployed to dismiss any reference to Japanese distinctiveness as politically suspect in favour of diversity. While effective for exposing Nihonjinron, this move often shuts down inquiry into how cultural logics actually shape communicative practice. In Japan, by contrast, the language of *multiculturalism* gained traction through state-led initiatives under the Cool Japan Strategy, devised to help revive the declining economy. Yet here too, the term culture was not neutral, which had to be framed in “safe,” marketable forms to appeal to potential future workers. Following this, the Japanese language had to become culturally neutral to avoid politicisation, whereby the roles of native speakers and the language they speak as role models were downplayed [15].

Here, it is necessary to examine the broader intellectual and historical treatment of the concept of nationalism in Japan to understand the Japanese academics’ reluctance to embrace Japanese culture. Since the end of the Second World War, nationalism has remained a sensitive subject, closely associated with the prewar state of militarism. It has been argued that postwar Japanese intellectual life was structured around embracing US-style democracy as a “progressive” identity, while nationalism was rendered taboo [18], [19], [20],[21]. Here, even mild assertions of cultural distinctiveness have often been criticised.

In both contexts, concepts borrowed from Western debates were accepted as if universally valid without attention to their sociocultural embeddedness in Japan. I argue this is the basis for the issue with the standardised Japanese following the JLPT system [5], which is an artificial, Europeanised “Esperanto Japanese” that bears little resemblance to everyday communication.

3. Methodology

This study employs a historical relational approach, first developed in my doctoral research project [22]. That work began with du Gay et al. [23], which introduced me to Appadurai’s [8] and Kopytoff’s [9] anthropological approaches to cultural objects: they study objects as if they were persons, with “social lives” and “biographies.” It is highly appropriate for a language, as I view it as a cultural artefact with history. To this I added other relational approaches, including Latour’s Actor–Network Theory (ANT), Callon’s concept of agencement, and Bourdieu’s field theory. ANT, developed within Science and Technology Studies (STS), was itself a critique of structuralism in social science, rejecting a priori assumptions and showing that actors acquire their attributes only through relations [24]. This hybrid framework is therefore especially suited to analysing how Japanese has been historically shaped by networks of reformers, institutions, and discourses of modernity.

Structuralism, derived from Saussure’s linguistics and extended by Lévi-Strauss, treated language as a self-contained system, privileging grammar as abstract, universal rules detached from context. This framework encouraged pedagogical practices that foreground grammar as the central mechanism of language learning. By contrast, a relational approach emphasises how meaning is produced in situated networks of relations. This critique is particularly relevant to the 19th-century Europeanisation of Japanese, where Western grammar rules were adopted as markers of rationalisation and progress.

At the same time, Bourdieu’s field theory and Mauss’s notion of techniques of the body [25] are helpful in countering accusations of essentialism. They show how culture is not a fixed attribute but a structuring force: like magnetism, it is invisible in itself but produces observable regularities. In language, these appear as patterns of practice, such as incomplete sentences, dropped pronouns, or



sentence-final particles, which reflect culture understood, in Williams's [1]sense, as 'a whole way of life.

4. Historical Context

4.1 Modernity and Europeanisation of the Japanese Language

Japanese people have long taken a selective approach to foreign cultural influences, adopting what suited their needs while leaving the rest aside. The clearest example is Chinese: kanji were imported and adapted as a writing tool, but Japanese grammar, syntax, and sounds remained intact, creating a script that never displaced the native linguistic system [26],[27]. By contrast, Buddhism was embraced far more deeply, shaping not only vocabulary but also cultural values such as sincerity, restraint, and compassion [28], [29]. Yamaguchi further suggests that Japanese phonology itself may have been influenced by Sanskrit, with a number of resonances to sounds in South Asian languages such as Hindi and Tamil. Similar affinities between Japanese and Tamil were explored by Ono [30], who noted striking structural and phonological parallels. These layered borrowings show that rather than wholesale adoption, Japan filtered outside influences through its own lens, ensuring that the language evolved in a distinctly Japanese way [31], [32].

Modernity, as theorised in both Western philosophy and postcolonial critique, has long been structured around binary oppositions: West as modern and advanced, East as traditional and backward [33], [34]. Within this framework, rationalisation became the defining marker of progress. In language studies, this rationalising impulse found expression in Saussurean structuralism, which abstracted language into a system of detachable units and rules, stripped of context. While powerful descriptively, such systematisation risks overlooking how language operates in practice. As Scott [35] argues in *Seeing Like the State*, projects of rationalisation may produce order at the level of administration but often at the cost of obscuring the complexity of lived realities.

4.2 The Creation of Modern Written Japanese and Grammar

Following my earlier discussion [5], the creation of a standardised written Japanese and the development of Japanese grammar in the late nineteenth century must be understood against the backdrop of modernity and colonial threat. After the arrival of Commodore Perry and the Unequal Treaties, Japan faced the real possibility of subjugation by Western powers. As Yoshitake [36] notes, the shogunate had already been misled in treaty negotiations, prompting urgent recognition that without mastery of foreign languages and a modern national language, Japan would remain vulnerable. Miura [6] and Kuginuki [7] similarly stress that the drive to Europeanise grammar reflected not curiosity but a survival strategy: a self-Orientalist adoption of Western categories to demonstrate parity with the West.

In the *Genbun itchi* movement, reformers sought to unify written and spoken Japanese by basing the standard on elite dialects and importing European grammatical categories [6]. Many terms were invented or translated directly from English, such as *de aru* ("is/are") and the pronouns *kare/kanjo*. Even the copula forms (*desu/masu, da*), now taught in the first chapters of elementary textbooks, were introduced at this time.

Japanese grammar underwent the same Westernising process. Despite sophisticated indigenous traditions, scholars struggled to reconcile Japanese with imported frameworks. The concept of "sentence," for example, was alien: Yamada and others had to turn to Kant and Wundt to grasp "a complete thought." Later debates on "subject" [37], "part of speech" [38], and "agency" [39] show the ongoing mismatch between Western categories and Japanese usage.

While this project gave Japan a unified linguistic identity, it also entrenched a Europeanised written standard that continues to dominate language education and provides the basis for institutionalised JFL today.



4.3 Institutionalisation of JFL

This history matters because the written language created in the Meiji era provided the foundation for what is now institutionalised in JFL as “standard Japanese.” Through the Japan Foundation, established in 1972 under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the introduction of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) in 1984, this Europeanised written form became consolidated as the global benchmark. Today, most textbooks and curricula are aligned, directly or indirectly, with JLPT levels, reifying this variety and exporting it as the authentic Japanese language, even though it is closer to an invented Esperanto than to the everyday speech of native speakers [5].

The JLPT is officially described as a measure of “communicative competence,” yet it does not test productive oral skills. Instead, it privileges reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar: exactly the domains shaped by Meiji-era Europeanisation. As a result, learners frequently sound as though they are reading written text when speaking, reproducing structures detached from lived communicative practice. Teachers trained in the JLPT system often resist the use of anime, drama, or other authentic materials, dismissing them as “not proper Japanese,” reinforcing the divide between written norms and spoken practice.

The institutionalisation of JFL has therefore entrenched a grammar-driven pedagogy that discourages attention to spoken interaction. While this may provide learners with grammatically correct sentences, it leaves them poorly prepared for authentic communication. More fundamentally, it perpetuates a version of Japanese stripped of its cultural characteristics, such as particles and ellipsis, that animate everyday interaction.

This gap between institutionalised Japanese and lived communicative practice sets the stage for my empirical analysis, which demonstrates how authentic materials reveal the cultural logics absent from JLPT-driven pedagogy.

5. The Use of Authentic Materials

5.1 Spoken Grammar and its Limits

Hirose [40] has pointed out the absence of “spoken grammar” in elementary-level JFL, arguing that features such as incomplete sentences and interactional particles are systematically overlooked in favour of written norms. Similarly, Toyozato [41] has authored a conversational textbook that introduces common elements of spoken Japanese through dialogue. While she presents them in Roman characters and encourages learners to continue following formal grammar-based channels, her work highlights the need for materials that foreground spoken usage. These calls resonate with my own approach. Drawing on transcripts from anime, YouTube videos, and TV commercials, I highlight recurrent features of spoken Japanese that cannot be explained through European-based grammatical models. Rather than treating these as deviations, I view them as evidence of how Japanese speakers construct meaning relationally, through shared context and pragmatic cues.

5.2 Authentic Materials in Three Categories

Over five years, I have analysed around 100 short videos, dividing them into three categories: anime, dramas, and non-scripted programmes. Anime is the most accessible because voice actors articulate clearly, even when exaggerating for effect. The scripted nature of anime introduces a wide range of expressions while still highlighting features of spoken Japanese such as incomplete sentences and particles. Dramas are more challenging, as actors sound more natural and articulation is often less clear, particularly among younger speakers who tend to mumble. Non-scripted materials, such as documentaries or variety shows, are the most difficult: here grammar is least apparent, syntax is highly flexible, and meaning depends heavily on shared context.

Crucially, transcripts alone cannot capture the full picture. Spoken Japanese is realised through networks of relations such as tone, gesture and shared cultural references, which are only visible in



the video itself. Anime makes these pragmatic cues unusually clear through embodied exaggeration. Authentic materials therefore do more than supply examples: they demonstrate how meaning in Japanese emerges relationally, beyond grammar alone.

5.3 Analysis: *Nichijou* Example

To illustrate, I draw on a short scene from the anime *Nichijou* (2011), which I often use in introductory sessions. This shows how even simple exchanges with incomplete sentences can reveal patterns of spoken Japanese that are invisible in textbook grammar.

Barista: あのう、ご注文は？

Anō, gochūmon wa?

“Um, your order?”

Girl (Yukko): エスプレッソのTで。

Esupurezzo no tī de.

“Espresso T will do.”

Neither subject pronouns nor verbs appear. Instead, the utterance consists of a noun phrase plus particle. The particle *de* indicates that the choice is reluctant, implying “that will do.”

In my lessons, I extend this example by comparing *de* with other particles. *Ne* seeks confirmation or solidarity, while *yo* asserts certainty or emphasis. Like *de*, these particles do not complete sentences in a grammatical sense but locate the utterance in a social relation, showing how the speaker positions themselves with respect to the listener.

This brief exchange also reveals how spoken Japanese encodes cultural values. While *Esupurezzo no tī de* looks incomplete by textbook standards, its meaning becomes clear when contrasted with alternatives:

- *Esupurezzo no tī wo (kudasai/onegaishimasu).* → “Could I have an Espresso T?”
- *Esupurezzo no tī ga (ii desu).* → “I would really like an Espresso T.”
- *Esupurezzo no tī wa (chotto...).* → “I am not sure about Espresso T.”

Each particle signals a different stance, from request to strong preference to hesitation. The *wo* form, arguably the most “complete,” is also the most often omitted since it is the default. This omission reflects a wider cultural logic: Japanese speakers often avoid explicitly asserting preference, especially with strangers, allowing shared context and particles to carry meaning.

5.4 Supporting Examples

Mini-drama: Tokyo Gas CM, “Yamete yo”

Daughter: やめてよ、お父さん。朝から裸でうろうろするの。やめてよ。

Yamete yo, otōsan. Asa kara hadaka de uro uro suru no. Yamete yo.

“Stop it, Dad. Don’t wander around naked from the morning. Stop it.”

Father: うまいな、唐揚げ。お前が作ったのか。

Umai na, karaage. Omae ga tsukutta no ka.

“This fried chicken is good. Did you make it?”



Daughter: やめてよ。私の化粧いやがるの。

Yamete yo. Watashi no keshō iyagaru no.

“Stop it. Don’t complain about my make-up.”

Here, *yamete yo* shifts in meaning with each repetition, signalling embarrassment, frustration, and rejection. Ellipsis and fragments carry the emotional weight, while the father introduces a new thread without markers. Omitted particles, such as *wo*, illustrate how everyday Japanese resists the full structures presented in textbooks.

Travel Documentary: Kanazawa Fish Market

M: あ、うおおおお。

A, ooooo.

“Ah, ooooh.”

W: あ、やってる、やってる。

A, yatteru, yatteru.

“Ah, they’re doing it, they’re doing it.”

M: うわあああ、違うね、やっぱり。あれれれれ...

Uwaaaa, chigau ne, yappari. Are re rerere...

“Wow, it’s really different. Oh, oh, oh...”

W: あ、カニだ。

A, kani da.

“Ah, crab!”

Shop assistant: はい、紅ズワイです。

Hai, benizuwai desu.

“Yes, it’s red snow crab.”

Here, unscripted speech relies on interjections (*a*, *uwaaa*, *heee*) and repetition, with minimal syntax. Recognition and shared understanding are co-constructed through sound and intonation, not sentence grammar.

5.5 Pedagogical Implications

Taken together, these examples highlight the gap between Europeanised written grammar institutionalised in JFL and the actual cultural logic of spoken Japanese. In *Nichijou*, meaning is conveyed almost entirely through an incomplete noun phrase plus particle. In the Tokyo Gas commercial, the repeated *yamete yo* shifts depending on relational context. In the Kanazawa documentary, interjections alone sustain communication. What look like fragments in grammar are in fact full communicative acts situated in cultural practice.

Viewed across authentic materials, such features reveal cultural patterns: ways of signalling deference, intimacy, hesitation, or recognition that recur in varied settings. Recognising these as practices observable in context, rather than as fixed national traits, makes it possible to teach culture without essentialism. They are not stereotypes (“the Japanese are indirect”) but relational strategies speakers use and learners can recognise.

In my training, I therefore present examples without handouts and ask students not to take notes. Instead, I encourage them to watch closely, notice patterns, and search for similar uses elsewhere. Language acquisition is a physical process of exposure and recognition, more like learning an instrument than memorising rules. The Cultural Input Method equips learners not only with linguistic



forms but also with the cultural logics that govern their use, fostering genuine intercultural communication.

6. Discussion

As Raymond Williams [1], Edward Hall [2], and Claire Kramsch [3] have all emphasised, language and culture are inseparable: culture provides the shared codes and practices through which communication becomes possible. In language education, this means that teaching cannot stop at grammar and vocabulary. It must also account for the cultural logics that shape how speakers interpret, select, and respond to linguistic cues.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Mauss's notion of *body techniques* provide useful ways of conceptualising this cultural dimension. Culture here is not a fixed "essence" of national character, but a set of embodied dispositions that surface in language use. In Japanese, these include pragmatic strategies such as the omission of pronouns, the reliance on shared situational context, and the frequent use of incomplete sentences or particles (*ne*, *yo*, *de*) to negotiate stance and alignment. These features illustrate that Japanese communication is deeply relational, requiring shared understanding beyond what grammar alone can explain.

In practice, shared cultural elements are necessary if language is to function as a medium of communication. A wholly diverse range of dialects and idiolects would make mutual understanding impossible. Yet in Japanese education, there has been a tendency, especially under the influence of critical approaches, to avoid teaching a recognisably "typical" Japanese way of speaking, for fear of essentialism. The problem is that the majority of TV programmes, publications, and everyday conversations are produced for Japanese audiences, drawing on those very communicative patterns. Unless learners are given access to them, their lives in Japan risk remaining superficial, limited to formal or textbook exchanges rather than fuller participation in Japanese society.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that culture is not peripheral but central to Japanese language education. Historical analysis showed how the Europeanisation of Japanese during the Meiji era, and its subsequent institutionalisation through the JLPT, produced a grammar-driven pedagogy that prioritises written norms over lived communicative practice. The result is what I have called "Esperanto Japanese": grammatically coherent, but stripped of the cultural logics that animate real interaction.

By adopting a historical relational approach, drawing on Actor–Network Theory, Bourdieu's field theory, and Mauss's techniques of the body, I have shown how the regularities of spoken Japanese can be understood without falling into essentialism. They are not timeless traits, but patterned practices sustained through *habitus* and cultural context.

Empirical analysis of authentic materials — from anime to commercials to documentaries — demonstrated how particles, ellipsis, interjections, and incomplete sentences convey meaning in ways unexplained by textbook grammar. These features reveal Japanese communication as a relational practice, dependent on shared context and cultural patterns.

The Cultural Input Method builds on these insights by equipping learners not with abstract rules but with strategies for observing and recognising language in use. This prepares them to engage more fully in Japanese society and promotes better intercultural communication. Ultimately, to teach Japanese effectively means to treat the language itself as a cultural artefact, one that learners must encounter in context if they are to grasp its core communicative logic.



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