

# CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON EFL INSTRUCTION IN JAPANESE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS: A CASE STUDY FROM SAITAMA PREFECTURE

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## Abstract:

This case study explores the impact of cultural expectations and societal norms on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in a Junior High School (JHS) in Saitama Prefecture, Japan. The findings highlight the tension between traditional Japanese educational practices and contemporary communicative teaching methods. The research provides insights into how cultural contexts influence EFL teaching methodologies.

*Keywords:* Cultural expectations, English as a foreign language teaching, classroom management, Japanese Junior High School, group harmony, deference to authority, educational approaches, cultural norms, teacher attitudes, language learning.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of culture is broad and norms, values, cultural expectations are within this particular concept. "Culture consists of patters, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditional elements of future action". (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952).

However, culture is embedded in the language and the language is embedded in the culture. It is obvious that the different languages are shaped by its surrounding culture and even the teaching, learning or acquiring foreign languages are also always influenced by that particular culture. Indeed, considerable attention has been given to the linguistic and cultural contrasts between developed and developing nations, largely sidelining the impact of English language teaching on wealthy but

non native English-speaking countries, such as Japan. Japan is one out of very few non-Western nations that could gain superior economic success without putting off its original culture and language.

This study investigates the role of cultural values and social pressure on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the context of Japan. ESL teaching in Japan is shaped by distinct cultural expectations, such as respect for authority, group harmony, and a hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, respectful behaviour and and also symbols of unique Japanese culture such as anime, manga and pop. These sociocultural factors, particularly norms and values can have substantial effects on, how teachers control the classroom, lesson, materials, methods of instruction and student participation in their learning activities.

### *Significance of the Study:*

Thus, the importance of this research lies in the fact that it points out the intersection of cultural expectations and EFL teaching practices in Japan. By showing how Japanese cultural values influence the conduct of classroom management and teaching methodologies, the cited study emphasizes a

culturally responsive teaching approach even within the non-Western cultural context. Understanding these cultural dynamics places educators in a strategic position to design more efficient and contextually relevant lessons that respect students' values while enhancing language learning outcomes. This study, therefore, contributes valuably in the light of the insights it provides to understand how wider cultural norms shape pedagogical practices in the language classroom environment.

***Problem Statement:***

Although many studies have been conducted on EFL teaching in Japan, relatively few studies have dealt with the extent to which cultural acculturation shapes classroom practice at the Junior High School stage. This paper tries to fill this gap by examining the impact of cultural expectation of the Japanese on the teaching of EFL and classroom management tactics used in a particular JHS environment.

***Research Objectives:***

- 1.To investigate the role of cultural norms in Japanese society on the EFL teaching practices among Junior High students.
- 2.To investigate the role of cultural expectations in the classroom management strategies and teacher-student interactions of an EFL classroom.
- 3.To state the problems and potential of EFL teachers in incorporating cultural expectations in their teaching strategies.

***Research Questions:***

- 1.What ways do Japanese cultural values shape EFL teaching approaches in Junior High School classroom environments?
- 2.What role do cultural expectations play in shaping classroom management techniques and interactions between students and teachers?
- 3.What difficulties does EFL teaching present for teachers in Japan to adapt their methods to Japan's cultural values and practices, and how do they tackle these issues?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Culture is widely recognized as a complex and dynamic system of shared patterns of behavior, symbols, and values within a given society. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) define culture as "patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action" (p. 181). This definition emphasizes the importance of both historical and contemporary aspects of culture, suggesting that cultural norms and values, which are passed down through generations, shape the behaviors of individuals in society. The understanding of culture as a product of historical action and as a blueprint for future actions is critical in understanding how educational systems, including English language teaching is influenced by cultural expectations.

Additionally, scholars have argued that culture must be considered when analyzing educational practices. Adler (1997) reinforces the notion that "culture is a shared and learned system of meaning that influences how individuals perceive and interact with the world around them" (p. 14). This aligns with the findings of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), who state that culture provides a framework for behavior that is both shaped by past traditions and capable of influencing future actions. In the context of EFL instruction, these cultural expectations and societal norms play a pivotal role in determining teaching methodologies, classroom management strategies, and teacher-student interactions.

A language is an aspect of a culture, and a culture an element of a language; the two are mutually embedded and inseparable such that one cannot be divorced from the other without losing the value of either language or culture. In other words, culture and language are inseparable. There are those who regard language as the "window onto the culture,"

i.e., the medium through which individuals come to experience that culture, by means of its words and expressions. One of the most frequently applied analogies to describe the interaction between language and culture is the iceberg, with a visible surface referring to language and a shallow exposed part of the culture and a huge, submerged section representing the substantial, submerged features of culture. The writer's conceptions of the relationship between language and culture can be described in three metaphors as follows: From a philosophical perspective: Language and culture living thing; Flesh and blood language and culture living being; language is the flesh, culture is the blood. Cultureless, language would be empty; without culture, language would be shapeless.

Scholars, business leaders, and so on usually underline Japan's cultural uniqueness, which re-establishes itself as extremely resistant to Westernization—the main vehicle that keeps language and culture in Japan intact as well. The point is, while English spreads across the globe, more than Japanese, the growing economic clout of mighty nations such as Japan raises issues on the future dynamics of the global linguistic order. Phillipson (1992), for example, argued that the increased power of either Japan or Germany would potentially reshape the outer contours of global language hierarchy by weakening the edifice of English. Indeed, the increasing rise of non-native speakers of Japanese is a reflection of the economic power of Japan. As such, Japanese becomes the most widely taught foreign language in Australia and one of the fastest-growing languages in Asia.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

In this study, data was collected from teachers' semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and classroom observations. The interviews and the informal conversations focused on teachers' perceptions of cultural influences on their teaching and classroom management, while the observations provided insights into the practical application of these cultural norms in real classroom settings.

The data was collected for 7 months since the study wanted to reach its objectives carefully, but not without coming to direct conclusions. The data was collected carefully under a close observation and a pilot and a post test was done to ensure the validity. Since the research design was based purely on qualitative data, thematic analysis has been applied to the data analysis generated from interview sessions, classroom observations, and teacher reflections. This would assist in picking up the recurring patterns and themes within the data, thus arriving at relevant conclusions relating to Japanese cultural values shaping the practice of teaching EFL. The thematic approach, therefore, supported the broadening of insight into how cultural expectations and norms shape classroom environments, lesson planning, teacher-student interaction, and overall teaching.

#### **Data Collection:**

**Interviews:** Five EFL teachers were interviewed about their teaching experiences, cultural influences on their practices, and classroom management strategies.

**Informal Conversations:** The researcher was engaged in informal conversations with reference to the lessons and plans. **Classroom Observations:** 10 lessons were observed to investigate how teachers interact with the students and integrate the cultural standards into teaching.

### **IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Thematic analysis of the data resulted in three overall themes based on the research objectives are: (1) cultural values and their roles in shaping EFL teaching practices, (2) classroom interactions and cultural expectations of management, and (3) challenges of aligning EFL teaching with the Japanese culture. The themes provide insight into the ways in which societal norms shape English language teaching in Japanese Junior High Schools. **Cultural Values Play a Great Role in Shaping EFL Teaching Practices.**

Japanese cultural values of structure, order, and respect play a major role in shaping the EFL

teaching approach. The need to establish a highly organized environment, one that would meet students' expectations, was underlined. One teacher noted, "In Japan, students expect a structured environment, and I always ensure that my lessons maintain that order. They are more comfortable when they know what is going to be done, and it helps them concentrate better. And the students do not like when it goes out of the plan". The latter part of her statement indicates how the structure and predictability sought by Japanese students conjoin with wider cultural expectations of order and routine. Displeasure at the unpredictable accordingly assumes the appearance of an example of that same cultural attitude in which an interruption of intended activities disrupts and distorts classroom participation and focus.

This preference for predictability and discipline is deeply embedded in Japan's societal norms. Studies have highlighted how cultural values in Japan prioritize group harmony and structured interactions (Sugimoto & Mouer, 1980). Punctuality and meticulous lesson planning were also common themes, with teachers ensuring each activity fit seamlessly into the allotted class time. Teacher B noted, "Time management is crucial; the students respect it, and so do I. It creates a rhythm that everyone follows."

#### Cultural Expectations in Classroom Interaction and Management.

Classroom management techniques reflect Japan's hierarchical culture and emphasis on group conformity. For example, teachers often avoid putting individual students in the spotlight to maintain harmony. "I emphasize group tasks since students are more willing to contribute if they're part of a group rather than being singled out. When I ask individual students to speak, they seem uncomfortable, but in groups, they collaborate more freely".

This cultural tendency is consistent with research arguing that Japan should be considered a collectivist nation, where conformity to group norms is rewarded and individual self-expression

discouraged (Phillipson, 1992). These observations indicated that group activities--like class discussions and group work--provided students the opportunity to participate without risking the embarrassment of making errors. The same is explained by a teacher: "Students feel safe working in groups. They know they won't be judged individually, and that makes them more confident. Teachers also displayed respect in the relationship by maintaining a formal, polite dynamic with students. One teacher commented, "I speak in a polite, formal tone when giving directions. The students respond well because they understand the difference between the teacher and student roles. It keeps the classroom disciplined."

#### Challenges in Adapting EFL Teaching to Japanese Cultural Norms.

Despite these advantages of aligning with cultural expectations, there are challenges in the adaptation of EFL teaching methodologies that meet both linguistic goals and societal norms. One major issue was the reliance on translations, which limits immersive English learning. A teacher mentioned, "Using Japanese explanations helps students understand, but it also reduces their exposure to English. It's a trade-off I have to balance carefully." Moreover, culturally, English is seldom in the foreground; hence, it is hard to inspire students. Another teacher commented, "For many students, English is not a priority, so I have to work harder to encourage them. I try to relate lessons to aspects of Japanese pop culture when possible."

In order to adapt to such issues, teachers used creative strategies to make the process of bridging the gap possible. These means usually include small group activities, culturally appropriate materials, and an overall friendly classroom atmosphere that will foster participation. A teacher explained, "I introduce fun, low-pressure activities that let students practice without feeling judged. It helps them open up gradually."

#### *Summary of Findings:*

Cultural values shaping EFL teaching approaches:

1. Structured, organized lessons prioritize predictability and discipline.

2. Strong emphasis on punctuality and time management. Cultural expectations in classroom interactions and management:

1. Group-based tasks reduce fear of mistakes and encourage collaboration. 2. Respectful, hierarchical teacher-student relationships maintain order.

Challenges in adapting EFL methods to cultural norms:

1. Reliance on translations limits English exposure.

2. Cultural disinterest in English requires creative engagement strategies.

Nevertheless, the results revealed that Japanese cultural values of respect for authority, consensus, and structure rising notably play key roles in the shaping of EFL teaching methodology at Junior High School. To achieve this, teachers adjust their methodologies to accommodate the cultural constraints on the students for orderliness and predictability; security will comfort the students. As much as it fosters co-operation, reduces anxiety; it limits spontaneous expression by individuals, independent critical thinking, as opposed to:.. These findings represent a delicate balance: while respect for cultural norms may be conducive to comfort and engagement for students, innovative methods that challenge these norms lightly can help in developing greater student agency and fluency. Further research might consider how to embed cultural sensitivity within pedagogic practices that support greater student participation and critical engagement.

#### **Limitations:**

While this case study provides valuable insights into the impact of cultural expectations on ESL teaching practices in a Japanese Junior High School, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged.

**Single-Site Case Study:** The present study is founded on data obtained in one Junior High School

in Saitama Prefecture. Accordingly, the results are context-dependent and it is not possible to generalize to all JHS classrooms in Japan. The cultural aspects and teaching methods found in the classroom, for example, may vary greatly in another location or similar classroom in a different school or institution in terms of demographics or institutional characteristics.

**Limited Sample Size:** Only five teachers were interviewed, which may not reflect the full scope of experience and/or views of all the ESL professors at the school. The lack of a sufficiently large sample size restricts the ability to go deep in terms of analysis into teacher diversity in teaching approach, experience, and hardship.

**Teacher Perspective Bias:** Data obtained from interview are the teachers' self-reporting, which can be affected by teachers' self-perception, bias, or the desire to appear teaching practices in a desirable way. [Other words] productions also played a part in resolving this, but it remains to be seen whether teachers' responses can fully reflect the particulars of classroom interactions.

**Classroom Observations:** Although classroom observation can give valuable information about teacher-student interaction, they are a rather small piece of the whole picture of classrooms. Teacher practices and behaviors could be modified during the observations, and this could affect the validity of the outcomes.

#### **Scope for Future Research:**

**Multi-Site Case Studies:** Future research could expand the scope by conducting multi-site case studies across different regions in Japan, allowing for comparisons of how cultural norms influence ESL teaching in various contexts. This would also contribute to the emergence of regional variations to teaching methods and classroom management approaches, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the larger national picture.



**Longitudinal Studies:** A longitudinal design could enable us to monitor over time the way in which cultural expectation influences the context of teaching practice. For example, studying how teachers adapt their methods as they gain experience in the classroom or how shifts in cultural norms influence classroom dynamics could provide valuable insights into the evolution of ESL teaching in Japan.

**Student Perspective:** When students' views are considered, it would afford a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of cultural norms on ESL teaching. Future studies could investigate how students perceive and react to culturally influenced teaching methods, as well as how their own cultural backgrounds shape their learning preferences and experiences.

**Comparative Studies:** Comparative research in the development of the impact of cultural norms on ESL teaching practices in Japan and other countries with different educational cultures (e.g., South Korea or China) may reveal similarities and divergences in the ways teachers conceptualize language teaching across different cultures.

**Focus on Pedagogical Innovations:** Future research might examine how ESL teachers in Japan adapt their teaching styles to overcome the traditional cultural constraint and the modern, communicative oriented teaching method. The investigation of both successes and challenges of such pedagogical innovations may offer important clues to the changing landscape of ESL education in Japan.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This research has served to highlight the way in which cultural expectations and social norms shape EFL teaching practices within the Japanese Junior High School classroom. Thematic analysis of qualitative data has identified Japanese cultural values, such as respect for authority, group conformity, and a preference for predictability, as

influencing teaching methods and classroom management strategies. Teachers constantly adjusted their methods to be sure that their classes were a well-organized and disciplined environment which fits the Japanese emphasis on harmony and discipline. Most of the classroom activities were group-based, especially since this reduces individual exposure and allows for a congenial learning environment.

However, whereas these cultural influences help in contributing to a well-ordered and respectful classroom, they raise some challenges, too. Their reluctance to work in an individual activity and insisting on group work may limit opportunities for developing student autonomy and spontaneous discussion. Hierarchical teacher-student dynamics at times hinder open student participation and creativity.

Despite these challenges, it remains very relevant to instill teaching methods with cultural sensitivity to create an environment of safety and security. It is in this light that study results urge a delicate balance between cultural expectations and driving the envelope toward a more active style that engages students more deeply. Subsequent research might look at finding ways to effect more student engagement and openness to communication within Japan's parameters of cultural appropriateness.

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