

*Transformative Effect of Reading Activities on Critical Incident Scenarios
in Fostering Cultural Empathy*

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Abstract

In response to the evolving political and social landscape of the 21st century, the focus in foreign language (FL) programs has transitioned from proficiency across skills to “transformation”. A key avenue through which this transformation can be achieved lies in FL classrooms, where the cultivation of "cultural empathy" is being pursued. However, this integration of language studies and cultural content, designed to stimulate self-reflection, critical analysis, and emotional engagement, presents notable challenges, particularly at introductory levels and in the context of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) environment, due to learners’ limited linguistic abilities, educators' hesitancy to use L1, and the lack of target-culture communities. To address this, the teacher-researcher conducted action research in an Elementary Japanese course: exploring students' transformation towards increased cultural empathy through a two-step exercise involving reading scenarios in Japanese and subsequently composing reflections and discussions in English. The reading materials explored value conflicts between Japanese people and individuals from different cultures. Qualitative thematic analysis of student reflections using MAXQDA (2022) revealed discernible patterns and outcomes indicating a sign of cultural empathy development. Notably, perspective transformation surfaced, especially in the context of punctuality. While the activity might not wholly transform students, it serves as a gateway to cultivating fundamental cultural empathy skills. Despite the limitations of this case study, it indicates that reading and discussion could effectively foster both FL skills and cultural empathy without the risk of real-world consequences.

Keywords: Transformative Language Learning and Teaching, Cultural Empathy, Critical Incident, Reading, Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL)

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Introduction

The realm of foreign language (FL) pedagogy finds itself at the crossroads of a significant paradigm shift in response to the multifaceted challenges posed by the political, social, and technological landscape of the 21st century (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, Paesani, 2016, Leaver et al., 2021, and Tohsaku, 2021). The dominance of communicative language teaching (CLT), particularly emphasizing the functional usage of language in oral communication, has characterized FL education since the 1990s. However, the contemporary context demands our attention to the profound influence of technological innovations, exemplified by machine/AI translation and learning apps, which, while fostering language learning, concurrently challenge the significance of FL classes, where language proficiency development has been the focal point (Tohsaku, 2021; Bourns, 2020). Amidst these shifts, the pivotal question emerges for language educators: what skills should we cultivate in future generations to ensure their resilience and success in the 21st century through FL education?

Aoun's (2017) "humanics framework" answers this question by highlighting essential human literacy skills, positioning them as indispensable tools to render individuals "robot-proof." Creativity, entrepreneurship, system thinking, empathy, cultural agility, and teamwork stand out as crucial components of this framework. Of particular significance is the notion of "cultural agility," elucidated by Aoun's colleague Paula Caligiuri as "the mage-competency that enables professionals to perform successfully in cross-cultural situations" (Aoun, 2017, p.70). The World Economic Forum's (2016) ranking reinforces these assertions, highlighting the demand for skills such as complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, and, notably, empathy—the linchpin ability projected to be the most crucial in 2030 (OECD 2017, 2018).

This places FL classrooms in a unique position to effectively develop empathy and cultural agility skills (Bourns, 2020). "Empathy," defined as "feeling in oneself the feelings of others" (Strayer & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 391), takes center stage in this scenario, especially in the realm of cross-cultural situations, encapsulated as "cultural empathy." This form of empathy becomes a skill that FL classrooms can adeptly cultivate, considering the intrinsic connection between language and culture in shaping individual and societal perspectives.

Cultural empathy, however, is not a knowledge-based acquisition; rather, it necessitates a transformative shift in perspective. Within the transformative language learning and teaching (TLLT) framework, as outlined by Leaver et al (2021), the power of foreign language learning to instigate shifts in learners' "thinking, behavior, acceptance of the other, values, mindset, and/or emotion" is underscored (p. 16). Consequently, TLLT, with its focus on fostering personal change, stands out as an effective avenue for nurturing an increase in one's cultural empathy.

This action research delves into the intricacies of transformation in the context of culture and language learning, aiming to unravel how cultural empathy can be fostered and integrated into FL classrooms. As a tangible outcome of this action research, the teacher-researcher presents a classroom reading activity conducted in an Elementary Japanese II course (JPN 102) within a Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) context. Through this study, the teacher-researcher aspires to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding transformative learning in 21st-century FL pedagogy and provide a practical exemplification of fostering cultural empathy in the FL classroom.

Literature Review

Increased Cultural Empathy as a Form of Transformation

Transformative learning, rooted in Mezirow's adult learning theory from 1978, distinguishes the learning experiences of adult and child learners, as “adults reevaluate previously held beliefs and attitudes and begin to interpret experiences in a new way” (Johnson, 2015, p. 18). In the context of Foreign Language (FL) education, this process facilitates a transformation in learners' perspectives and behaviors by exposing them to diverse sociolinguistic and cultural norms. One notable transformation that could occur in FL classrooms is the development of “increased cultural empathy.” Wang et al (2003) define cultural empathy as the manifestation of empathy in cross-cultural settings. A parallel terminology “(inter)cultural awareness,” has been used to refer to one's cultural sensitivity in cross-cultural situations. However, Zhu (2011 p.116) underscores the importance of “empathy” by asserting that “the mere realization of cultural awareness is far from sufficient... language learners in cross-cultural situations ... should try by every means to cultivate empathetic concepts and precepts in the process of foreign language learning.” Cultural empathy is not an innate ability but “a learned ability” (Ridley & Lingle, 1996, p. 32) through bi/multi-cultural experiences. The development of empathy requires individuals to internalize others' emotions and concerns, a depth of understanding that transcends the knowledge acquisition of different cultures. Hence, “disorienting dilemma,” as originally proposed by Mezirow (1978), which is considered as a cross-cultural incident that “shakes learners’ belief systems and causes them to reflect, dissect, and analyze” in TLLT (Leaver et al 2021:17), plays a significant role in cultivating cultural empathy.

Disorienting Dilemma and Critical Incident as a Trigger of Transformation

While many cases of learner transformation presented in TLLT occur in study-abroad or cross-cultural communication settings, Leaver et al (2021 p. 17) suggests that even in the observation of culture from afar, language learners can experience disorienting dilemmas. This is particularly relevant for FL educators teaching abroad, where there might be limited interaction with the people and culture of the target language, as in the present research case involving learners with minimal exposure to Japanese culture. There are many ways to observe the target culture from the outside, but Boris (2017) mentions that personal narratives resonate with audiences, making them relatable and memorable. Consequently, they hold the potential to create more immersive experience. It indicates that narratives have the potential to cause strong emotional conflicts and/or to increase empathy in one’s mind. Thus, the present research draws on the concept of critical incidents, akin to those used in culture assimilators which was popular in the 1960-90s. A critical incident refers to a situation where there is a communication problem between people of different cultures due to a lack of understanding of each other’s cultures (Kleinfeld, 1998; Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993). A culture assimilator can be described as “programmed learning experience designed to expose members of one culture to some basic concepts, attitudes, role perceptions, customs and values of another culture” (Knop, 1976; Fiedler, Mitchell and Triandis, 1971) and consists of three parts; a critical situation, four possible interpretations, four feedback explanations. The purpose of this program is to acculturate a person so that there are correct and incorrect choices of response to the specific critical situation. It is worth noting that while critical incidents were historically employed for acculturation, this study aims to leverage them for gaining diverse perspectives and fostering empathy and respect for different cultures.

Kleinfeld's (1998) utilization of critical incident scenario for teacher training in cultural diversity demonstrated that engaging in discussions surrounding these cases elicited emotional and intellectual responses from teachers, fostering a deeper understanding of the cases and each other's experiences. This finding suggests that a discussion format can be effective not only in building empathy and cultural understanding related to the target culture but also towards the cultures of students' home countries and communities. Similarly, previous research has incorporated critical incidents into foreign language (FL) classrooms to enhance cross-cultural understanding, particularly in intermediate or advanced levels (Stakhnevich, 2002). However, it is noteworthy that while the effectiveness of discussions based on critical incident stories is implied, there is a scarcity of research utilizing critical incidents as materials for introductory-level courses in the target language.

Another Challenge FL Educators Face When Fostering Cultural Empathy

Certainly, fostering cultural empathy in the FL classroom requires the incorporation of cultural content. Although cultural content has become even more significant (Paesani 2016, Leaver et al 2021), research by Sercu (2005) sheds light on the hurdles confronted by FL instructors, especially in introductory level courses, when integrating culture into FL classrooms. These challenges include limited student language proficiency, time constraints, curriculum limitations, and teacher reluctance to use the native/common language in class. Despite these obstacles, insights from Garrett-Rucks (2013) and Li, Mazzotta, and Liu (2022) underscore the effectiveness of employing English for meaningful cultural reflections in FL classrooms.

Motivation of the Present Study

A substantial body of research exists within the framework of Transformative Language Learning and Teaching (TLLT) and on the topic of cultural sensitivity and cultural empathy, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the development of cultural empathy as a distinct form of transformation. Additionally, limited research has explored the potential of critical incidents to serve as catalysts for disorienting dilemma/transformation in the context of learning target language as a foreign language remains under-investigated, signaling an opportunity for further inquiry. Moreover, the challenge of integrating culture learning in FL classrooms, especially at the elementary level, calls for innovative approaches and materials to facilitate cultural learning in the early stages of FL education. The present study, therefore, proposes a balanced approach to tackle these challenges: the implementation of critical incidents as reading materials in the target language, followed by in-depth discussions in English and aims to investigate the potential of utilizing a reading and discussion activity centered around critical incident scenarios to amplify students' "cultural empathy." The research questions (RQ) are as follows:

1. How does engaging in a reading activity focused on critical incident scenarios influence the development and augmentation of cultural empathy?
2. Does any sort of transformation happen to students through the activity?
3. Does this activity effectively tackle the challenges associated with culture learning in introductory-level language courses?

Method

Participants and Course

The present study was conducted as action research in a classroom setting. The study targeted thirty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in a Japanese elementary-level course (JPN101 and JPN102) at a university in the southern United States. Students cultural/language background are diverse, encompassing individuals from the U.S., Europe, Africa, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Notably, the majority were East Asian students. They pursued diverse non-language related majors. The course was offered during the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year to students who had no previous experience learning Japanese before the first semester. The course consisted of two 75-minute in-person sessions and one 50-minute Zoom meeting per week. The instructor primarily used English to explain target grammar items, while students had ample opportunity to engage in Japanese with their peers during the lessons.

Learning Material

The course utilized the Genki textbook, covering lessons L1-5 in first semester and L6-10 in second semester. Therefore, to enhance students' understanding of the topic and language forms they learned in the lesson, each narrative used as reading materials was carefully chosen to explore themes pertinent to lessons 6-10 of the Genki textbook. It consisted of scenario, each comprising 400-500 characters in Japanese and explored value conflicts between Japanese people and individuals from different cultures. Topics included educational system - "the meaning of silence in class," Family & kinship terms - "marriage between a Japanese and American," Foods in Japan - "chopsticks manners and taboos," Traditional cultures - "tradition and gender issues," and public transportation - "punctuality and flexibility." These narratives were thoughtfully reconstructed by the teacher-researcher to align with the proficiency levels of the students as the scenario were sourced from diverse outlets, including news, social media, personal connections of the teacher-researcher, and research articles.

<p>Read the news below and answer the questions in English.</p> <p>2018年4月4日に、日本で大きいニュースがあった。すまうのしあいのまえに、まいつるし (Meiurushi) のしちようがどひようのはあがって、あいきつていた。でも、すまにそこであれた。ひようきだった。その日は、かごしの女の人が、しあいを観に来ていたから、いそいでしちようをたすけに行った。その時、さようじ (sumo referee) が「女の人はどひようきかおきてください。男の人がおきてください。」と言った。どひようのいいいんちの男の人も、その女の人の「おきてください。」と言った。女の人は、しちようをたげたあと、どひようをおりて、すまに、さようじはどひようにしあをまいた。すまうでは、どひようの上に女の人があがってはいけないうえがあるが、ひようきの人をたすけるのはどひようなことだ。たたくまんの日本人が外国の人があがるとはあかしく思った。</p> <p>そのニュースのあと、4月6日へのすまうのしあいがあつた。そこでは、たからづかし (Takarasuka city) のしちようがあいさつをした。でも、しちようは女のだから、どひようの上にあがってはいけなかつた。しちようは「どひようの上であいさつをしていいですか。」と言いたが、さようじ (sumo referee) は「なんとうはいりとしてください。(Please respect our sumo tradition)」と言った。しちようは、どひようの下であいさつをした。</p> <p>どひよう sumo wrestling arena, sumo ring</p> <p>New vocabulary</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. しあひ sports match/game2. しちよう mayor3. たおれた 一たおれる (ru-verb) collapse4. たすけ 一たすける help, rescue somebody5. しあをまいた 一しあをまく throw salt *It is believed that salt has purifying powers.6. ひつようなこと necessary things7. おかしい crazy, insane (in other contexts); funny, strange8. べつ the another, other 	<p>Discussion questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What was your first impression and thoughts after reading this news? Are there traditions in your/other countries that you would change if you could?2. To what extent are "tradition" and "gender equality" important to you? <i>People thought the act of sumo referee on 4/4 incident (life threatening situation) was inappropriate, but 4/6 incident (non-emergency) did not get as much attention as 4/4 incident gained.</i>3. Some of the traditional theaters are male or female exclusive. Some think that the characteristics make those theaters unique while others say it should be open to any cast to play regardless of gender. Do you think we should promote gender inclusivity/equality in those theater arts as well? Why or why not? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kabuki (traditional theater) is performed only by male actors (girls can perform on stage until the age of first menstruation.) and those men who play female roles are called "onnagata 女形". It is registered as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.• Takarazuka revue (modern theater) was opened in 1914 and is still organized only by female actresses. Those women who play male roles are called "otokoyaku 男役". <p>News reference:</p> <p>https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2018/04/c39e66ddcedf-female-mayor-barred-from-giving-speech-in-sumo-ring-in-wake-of-furor.html [English article]</p> <p>https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/statement/3104.html [Japanese article]</p> <p>More information:</p> <p>https://ich.unesco.org/en/01/kabuki-theatre-00163 [Kabuki]</p> <p>https://asianjournalusa.com/exploring-the-possibility-of-gender-inclusivity-in-kabuki-theatre/ [Kabuki]</p> <p>https://learnjapanese123.com/takarazuka-japan-famous-all-female-theatre/ [Takarazuka]</p>
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Image 1: An Example of reading material

Procedures

The teacher-researcher conducted the reading activity at the end of each textbook lesson in-person, with each session taking 30-40 minutes of the regular class time. The session commenced with a 10–15-minute reading of the selected text on an online learning management system called Canvas, followed by a 5-minute Q&A session to ensure participants had a precise understanding of the presented scenarios. Subsequently, participants were given 15 minutes to engage in reflective writing, guided by questions formulated by the teacher-researcher. For lessons 6-7, this reflective process was followed by an enriching class discussion. While initial plans included a class discussion format for lessons 8-10 as well, time constraints and other commitments led to a modification where students read their peers' comments only. Despite this adaptation, valuable exchanges were facilitated, contributing to the overall success of the activity. At last, participants were engaged in overall reflective writing about the reading and class discussion/peer comments. Additionally, at the end of the semester, participants were tasked with crafting a 250-word reflective essay based on their cumulative experiences with the reading activity. The languages used in each segment of the activity are in image 2 below.

Session	Date	Content
Lesson 6	Jan 23	the meaning of silence in class
Lesson 7	Feb 6	marriage between a Japanese and American
Lesson 8	Feb 20	chopsticks manners and taboos
Lesson 9	Mar 1	tradition and gender issues
Lesson 10	Mar 29	punctuality and flexibility
End of semester reflection	Apr 3	Semester reflection

Table 1: The Schedule and Content of reading and discussion activity

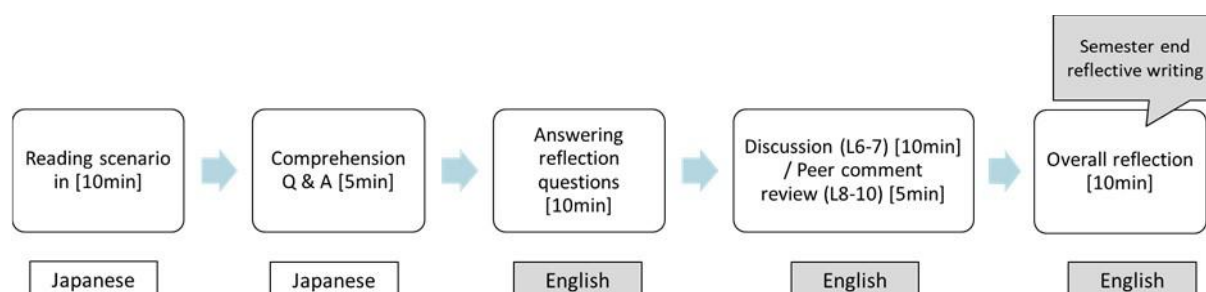


Image 2: Language usage in each segment of the activity

The rationale behind employing reflective writing lies in its ability to unveil internal thoughts, provide a platform for reserved students to share, and aligns with recent research suggesting its transformative impact in language classrooms (Crane 2018, De Santis & Willis 2016, Johnson 2015). The utilization of a discussion format has proven to be effective in fostering connections and empathy among students within the classroom setting, as highlighted by Kleinfeld (1998). This format not only provides a platform for students to elaborate on their opinions initially shared on the Canvas discussion board but also serves as an avenue for a deeper exploration of Japanese culture and mutual understanding of each other's diverse cultural backgrounds. Particularly in introductory-level language courses, the role of the native language (L1) is pivotal in the process of meaning-making. Recognizing that the primary focus of this activity is on perspective transformation rather than the development of language skills, the choice of English as the common language in the classroom discussions becomes paramount. This strategic use of English promotes equal

participation among students, irrespective of individual differences in Japanese proficiency levels, ensuring an inclusive and enriching learning environment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place in the early months of 2023, spanning the Spring semester. Out of the 38 initially targeted students, 34 consistently attended all sessions, and their responses form the focus of our analysis. Since transformation is a process that unfolds over time, semester-end reflective writings (minimum 250 words) serve as the primary source for potentially observing and analyzing transformation. This approach allows us to capture the evolving nature of students' experiences and perceptions throughout the course.

The teacher-researcher conducted thematic analysis, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The qualitative research software, MAXQDA (2022), was employed for efficient organization and analysis of the rich qualitative data, facilitating a rigorous exploration of the themes emerging from students' reflective writings. Recognizing the intricate and subjective nature of personal transformation, the study acknowledges the diverse backgrounds and experiences of these 34 participants. Given the individualized and context-dependent character of transformation, the study refrains from seeking nomothetic generalization and instead opts for a qualitative research method to delve into the depth of each student's unique experience. The modest sample size further underscores the appropriateness of qualitative methods. The study prioritizes transferability, which as defined by Duff (2006) and Lincoln and Guba (2009), hinges on fittingness—the congruence between the original study's context and the potential application in other settings.

Results and Discussion

In order to answer the research questions (RQ), both quantitative and qualitative data are presented; accordingly, all names used for students' comments are pseudonyms.

The discerned patterns found from the data are as shown in table 2 and 3. Numerous students affirmed that they deepened understanding of Japanese culture and classmates' cultures, concurrently reevaluating their own values. Additionally, some recognized the importance of empathy. The comments labeled as “self-reflection on one’s own values” and “importance of putting oneself in other’s shoes” are the vital components of “cultural empathy,” as defined by Zhu (2011) and Ivey, Ivey, & Simek-Morgan (1997), seeing the world through another’s eyes and feeling and experiencing their internal world without mixing one's own thoughts and actions with those of the client. Thus, this activity successfully offered opportunities for students to develop and increase their cultural empathy.

Code	Count
Knowledge of Japanese culture and classmates' cultures	20
Self-reflection on one's own values	12
Importance of putting oneself in other's shoes	7
Importance of clear communication	7

Table 2: Participant’s reflection on overall learning outcome throughout the semester

As shown in table 3 below, notably, the semester-end writings revealed genuine emotional responses to the scenarios, underscoring the enduring impact of these narratives on students'

feelings and reflections. As Boris (2017) stated, personal narratives resonate with audiences, making them relatable and memorable and it seems to be true in this case too.

Code	Count
Empathy (L6 - the meaning of silence in class)	6
Sadness (L7 - marriage between a Japanese and American)	2
Anger (L9 - tradition and gender issues)	9
Surprise (L10 - punctuality and flexibility)	5

*No participants mentioned emotions they recall from L8 reading

Table 3: Emotions participants recall about each critical incident scenario

As for RQ1 regarding the impact of critical incident scenario on the development of cultural empathy, this reading activity seemed to serve as a platform to foster fundamental cultural empathy skills, immersing students in the emotional journey of the story's characters. The emotional resonance many students demonstrated with the characters suggested a pre-existing level of cultural empathy before taking this course. Nonetheless, certain comments quoted from participants' writings below unveiled challenges, indicative of a potential disorienting dilemma. (Underline indicating a disorienting dilemma and bold font suggesting increased cultural empathy were added by the author).

- 1) *When I read about the time management readings, I felt troubled to accept the second type of time management (= Latin time) (John)*
- 2) *Such emotion (= frustration) taught me that sometimes I could not simply accept everything as it is. (Tim)*

For RQ2 where the focus was on whether transformation occurs through the reading activity, the data indicates that a profound transformation didn't unfold during the semester; however, notable shifts in perspective and mindset, indicative of increased cultural empathy, did transpire. Ethan expressed intentions to alter his behavior when interacting with Japanese individuals, signifying changes in his approach.

- 3) *My parents love to send food (chopstick to chopstick) to me to show their love. However, it seems disrespectful in Japanese culture. Also, we cannot stick the chopstick. **Probably I will talk to my parents about this little story, and if I have a Japanese friends, I will pay more attention to it.** (Ethan)*

The quotes below show that participants with a more relaxed approach to time, often associated with "Latin time," undertook a reconsideration of their behavior. Encouragingly, some expressed a commitment to understanding perspectives divergent from their own. This shift in mindset signifies a notable increase in cultural empathy following the reading activity.

- 4) *I am a extreme casual person and did believe that being late shouldn't be a big issue. But after reading the comments by my fellow classmate, **I realized that showing up on time and keeping updates with schedules should be a more respectful thing.** (Aline)*

- 5) *The last story I read is awe-inspiring to me. This also, to some extent, changed my attitude toward time issues. I previously have not realized that being late is a way of not showing respect to others.* (Rin)
- 6) *This changed my behavior as, after reading these stories, I start to put more attention on my friends' feeling and trying hard not to be late when I have appointments with my friends.* (Edward)

Meanwhile, on the same topic, a fascinating observation emerged. Students who prioritize punctuality demonstrated an awareness of the opposing viewpoint but retained a negative emotional response toward those with a more relaxed attitude towards time. It appears that while they acknowledged the difference, truly empathizing with the "Latin-time" perspective seems challenging for them. This insight implies that accepting diverse viewpoints on certain concepts may present greater difficulty compared to others.

Furthermore, some participants mentioned that they had been already exposed by different cultures since childhood, therefore, this activity offered them an opportunity to reflect on their own values and perspectives but did not give them disorienting dilemma and/or a new insights into cultural value conflicts. Thus,

Lastly, concerning RQ3 which questioned the effectiveness of this activity towards the issues at elementary level FL classroom discussed in the literature review, many students offered positive feedback as seen in table 4 below, citing the engaging nature and authentic content. Furthermore, they found the grammar and vocabulary challenges to be at a suitable level, enhancing language proficiency, particularly in reading skills. This underscores the activity's dual capacity to address both linguistic and cultural elements, even within the constraints of limited proficiency.

Category	Code	Count
Cultural content	Engaging way to learn culture in context than textbook	6
	Opportunity to learn Japanese and classmates' cultures	4
	Real examples – easy to relate and be emotional	5
Language content	Decent level of challenge (grammar and vocabulary)	7
	Contribution to improving reading speed	2

Table 4: Feedback on the learning activity

Conclusion

The exploration into the integration of critical incident scenarios in an elementary-level Japanese language course has yielded significant insights, enriching the discourse on transformative language learning and teaching (TLLT) and the cultivation of cultural empathy in foreign language (FL) education. This research aimed to assess the impact of a reading activity centered around critical incidents on students' cultural empathy, specifically addressing the challenges inherent in culture learning within introductory-level language courses.

Results indicate that the reading activity exerted a positive influence on students' comprehension of Japanese culture and their classmates' diverse cultural backgrounds. The

engagement with critical incident scenarios prompted a profound reflection on personal values and the intrinsic importance of empathizing with others. Noteworthy challenges, such as grappling with the concept of punctuality, hinted at the initiation of disorienting dilemmas—a pivotal element in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978). Although a profound transformation did not transpire during the semester, notable instances of increased cultural empathy emerged. Students demonstrated a willingness to reconsider their behaviors and adopt a more culturally sensitive approach. The identification of disorienting dilemmas in some responses suggests that the reading activity triggered cognitive conflicts, prompting students to question their preconceived notions and consider alternative cultural perspectives.

Furthermore, the emotional responses expressed by students in their semester-end reflections underscored the enduring impact of the narratives. Feelings of empathy, sadness, anger, and surprise in response to specific critical incidents suggested a genuine connection with the characters and scenarios presented. This aligns with the notion that personal narratives, when adeptly employed, can evoke robust emotional responses, rendering the learning experience more relatable and memorable. However, it is crucial to emphasize the commitment to maintaining a safe and supportive environment for all participants involved. Given the sensitive nature of the research—exploring personal reflections, cultural perspectives, and potentially transformative experiences—FL educators must be steadfast in upholding ethical standards and ensuring the well-being of every participant.

The study also addressed challenges related to integrating cultural content in introductory-level FL classrooms. Positive feedback from students regarding the activity's engaging nature, its relevance to real-life examples, and its contribution to language skills improvement indicates that short reading activities featuring authentic cultural content can effectively navigate obstacles posed by limited language proficiency, time constraints, and curriculum limitations.

While this research provides valuable insights, acknowledging its limitations is essential. The study's timeframe was confined to one semester, relying primarily on semester-end reflective writings. This short-term perspective may not fully capture the long-term effects of the reading activity on students' cultural empathy and transformative learning. Disparities in language skills may have influenced the depth of engagement with critical incident scenarios and subsequent reflections. Additionally, focusing on Japanese language learners in a specific university setting might limit the transferability of outcomes to other language courses or institutions with distinct curricula, student demographics, and language learning contexts.

To comprehensively understand the impact of reading activities on cultural empathy, future research should explore the long-term effects beyond a single semester. This would offer valuable insights into the sustained influence on students' perspectives over an extended period. Delving into alternative topics that are more likely to trigger disorienting dilemmas could push the boundaries of cognitive conflicts, potentially leading to more profound transformative experiences. Exploring the integration of multimodal approaches, such as visuals or interactive elements alongside critical incident scenarios, could be pursued to assess their impact on cultural empathy.

In conclusion, the utilization of critical incident scenarios in an elementary-level Japanese language course proved to be a valuable approach for fostering cultural empathy and addressing the dual challenges of cultural and language learning. The study contributes to the existing literature on TLLT by providing practical insights into the implementation of

transformative pedagogy in introductory FL courses. As language educators navigate the evolving landscape of FL education in the 21st century, incorporating innovative and meaningful activities that promote cultural empathy remains a crucial aspect of preparing students for global citizenship.

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