

***Best Practices for Teaching a Course on Culture for EFL Undergraduate Students in Japan and Abroad: Based on Literature Review From 2016 to 2021***

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The European Conference on Arts, Design & Education 2022  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This literature review examined academic papers written in Japanese and English on how courses on culture for EFL (i.e., English as a foreign language) undergraduate students in Japan and abroad were taught, and suggestions for teaching that scholars and educators have for educators and administrators. The databases used were CiNii, ERIC, and ProQuest with full text search for all databases. The researcher identified 38 relevant articles for integration in the paper, after reading through and annotating 54 papers that were not overlapping. The researcher found that academic papers available on culture instruction at the undergraduate level for EFL in Japan focused on sources outside of the classroom such as short-term study abroad programs, long-term study abroad programs, video-conferencing and interaction with students from other countries who are also learning EFL, and social network services to educate students about culture. On the other hand, culture instruction at the undergraduate level for EFL abroad focused on activities in the classroom, particularly, having students learn about culture through movies, comics, and works of literature. Implications for administrators and educators involved with or are about to be involved with designing or teaching undergraduate courses on culture in Japan or abroad particularly in EFL contexts will be discussed based on literature review.

Keywords: Teaching, Undergraduate Students, Japan, Abroad, English as a Foreign Language

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## Introduction

Inda (2019) investigated 300 first year university students in Tokyo, Japan, on the intercultural education they receive during English classes in middle school and high school and found that 71 percent did not have opportunities to learn cultures aside from the United States and the United Kingdom. Inda points out that if instruction to improve intercultural competence is difficult to deliver at the middle school and high school levels, it might be necessary to make up for the missed hours of instruction during college. EFL teachers and researchers have noted that culture and language are two sides of the same coin and are intertwined (Chaya & Inpin, 2020; Bagui & Adder, 2021). However, the idea of making up for missed hours suggest that linguistic competence is being prioritized over cultural competence within EFL. Osada (2016) investigated undergraduate students' attitudes toward other cultures at a university in Japan (N=123 with 104 freshmen, 14 juniors, and 5 seniors) who are aiming to become elementary school teachers and found that preservice teachers are concerned about their lack of knowledge of other cultures and their lack of confidence in reading and writing in the target language. This paper attempts to identify the best practices for teaching a course on culture at the undergraduate level in Japan and abroad based on a literature review of papers published between January 1, 2016 to June 11, 2021. This paper will be relevant to educators and administrators in charge of or are about to teach a course on culture at universities in Japan and abroad. According to Regmi et al. (2010), studies available in English are often excluded from systematic reviews because of language restrictions. Additionally, Sunol and Saturno (2008) argued that research conducted in languages other than English is less available and referenced than those published in English. This paper will compare how culture is taught for EFL undergraduate students at Japanese universities against how culture is taught for EFL undergraduate students abroad. The EFL context abroad serves as a reference point for evaluating how culture is taught at the undergraduate level in Japan within EFL and illuminate distinct features of cultural instruction. That will allow for drawing implications for educators and administrators both in Japan and abroad.

## Defining culture

Culture, the central construct of this paper will be defined hereafter, first, focusing on a broad definition of culture, second, focusing on what culture means within Japanese people, and finally, focusing on what intercultural means and the definition of Intercultural Communicative Competence, a construct that appears throughout this paper and existing literature on EFL pedagogy. Culture will be broadly defined as a system of ideas that control the attitude and behaviors of humans both individually and in groups (Jawas, 2020). Culture is perceived by the Japanese people as something that is internal and external. Bonnah (2020) explains that Japanese people speak of "touching culture" (p. 120), and argues that it is a discourse schemata that shapes their behavior. Bonnah relates the concept of touching culture to the Japanese concept of self and the other (i.e., *uchi* and *soto*). As Gómez (2018) argued, being intercultural means confronting elements of deep culture such as social behaviors and norms, lifestyles, politeness, as well as personal and collective ideologies about values, class, race, gender, money, education, work, and human rights. Intercultural Communicative Competence (i.e., ICC) means the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures, and the ability to be aware of cultural diversity (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018). While it is a time-consuming task, enhancing the components of ICC is crucial for helping learners deal with deep, complex, and controversial ideologies and beliefs (Gómez, 2018).

## Teaching culture at the undergraduate level in Japan

First, technology has been utilized to connect students inside and outside of the classroom. Bonnah (2020) scaffolded culture in class through Gallery Walks (i.e., works of art found on the Internet) over a semester, along with Twitter responses to these cultural activities outside of class. Bonnah argued that students demonstrated their acquisition of ICC when some students decided to go beyond the class assignment and decided to choose works of art not shown in class to make comments about them or made that work of art's image their desktop background. According to Bonnah, using Twitter as a conduit of expression can help students accumulate culture over time. Tabata, Jones, and Anzai (2019) used Skype for (1) a read-through of a movie entitled *Mr. Fox* after gaining permission from the movie director, and (2) home-country presentations on PowerPoint with Japanese university students, Japanese high school students, international students from China and Vietnam, and Indonesian university students. According to Tabata, Jones, and Anzai, read-through activities have a script that students can practice beforehand and including students other EFL learners can be a tool to communicate interculturality.

Second, a five-day intensive English camp for first-year undergraduate students majoring in English and Cultures in Japan in which they were only allowed to speak English (Noguchi, 2019) was another strategy employed by universities in Japan for students to build their ICC. Noguchi found that the five-day camp had contributed to decreasing some students' anxiety and increasing their perception of communicative competence. The researcher points out that compared with studying abroad, participating in an English camp is more economical and safer for young English learners.

Third, having students experience short-term study abroad for two to four weeks as part of the curriculum was another strategy employed for building students' ICC. In terms of preparation for studying abroad, Cutrone (2020) examined 20 first-year students at a national university in southern Japan who studied abroad for 3.5 weeks and found that the students who received explicit instruction on listenership behavior generally outpaced the group that received implicit instruction in terms of their pragmatic competence. In terms of outcomes of short-term study abroad, Nakasato (2017) analyzed nine undergraduate students' essays attending Okinawa Christian University after their 2-week cultural exchange and study abroad in Hawaii's Kaua'i Community College and found that students: (1) understood more about their own culture, (2) learned not to be ethnocentric (3) became more interested in cultures abroad, (4) developed their understanding of the differences in education between Hawaii and Japan, and (5) understood how Japan could emulate Hawaii in terms of educators not being so critical of students but more encouraging. In terms of affect, students learned empathy, tolerance, sensitivity, flexibility, and openness. Finally, students learned to reciprocate, communicate proactively, and value human interaction through the intercultural experience. With these results, Nakasato believes that Okinawa Christian University should continue to refine the contents of the study-abroad program. Similarly, Isa (2016) examined how three types of short-term study abroad programs: (1) intensive language program, (2) early childhood care and education and (3) volunteer work-study had an impact on college students' levels of confidence. The researcher found four factors to be prominent including: self-affirmation, ability to build interpersonal relationship, sense of capability, and ability to recover from emotional setbacks. Members of the overseas volunteer work-study group scored high on confidence building, especially the ability to build personal relationships and the ability to recover from emotional setbacks. However, Isa also noted that the participants indicated how whatever they engage in, they feel their lack of competence. Isa thinks that this

comes from culture shock and hardships the participants experienced during their study abroad. Finally, Ikeda (2020) documented the effects and self-perceived changes that occurred as a result of studying abroad in the Philippines by drawing on a case study of 103 Japanese university students on a four-week intensive English language program. The study found that among common themes that emerged was a shift in focus from grammatical form and accuracy to communication-oriented goals of learning. Additionally, consensus was reached about students' perceived improvement in oral communication skills and more comfort in using English. In Ikeda's study, 80 out of 98 students responded positively to the statement: "I was able to improve my test-taking skills (for TOEIC, IELTS, etc.)" (p. 7). Students boosted their highest achieved TOEIC scores with 39 more students having reached the 600-point benchmark compared to pre-departure.

### **Suggestions for teaching culture at the undergraduate level in Japan made by researchers in the existing literature**

First, Saki (2017) suggests three approaches to teaching local ethnic diversity in the EFL classroom. Three approaches include: (1) beyond-the-textbook approach such as with current events in local newspapers, media coverage of certain topics, documentaries, and movies; (2) fieldwork, which could include interviewing people and conducting surveys; (3) in-class activities such as role-plays, games, debates, and discussion of case studies. Saki notes that the benefits of teaching about domestic ethnic diversity to Japanese university students include: strengthening students' intercultural awareness and cultural consciousness, raising students' intercultural sensitivity, and developing students' skills to prevent intercultural conflict before it occurs.

Second, Koshiyama, Aliponga, and Hou (2019) suggest creating a multilingual and multicultural environment by having an English and Japanese hybrid class. The researchers examined whether an English and Japanese hybrid class created a multilingual and multicultural environment by having 32 students who were a mix of Japanese and international students taking a Japanese Civilization class take pre-instructional and post-instructional surveys. The international students were from China, Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The results show that Japanese students as well as international students all had positive perceptions of class contents and instruction in Japanese and English. The researchers point out that based on the results of the study, English and Japanese hybrid class provided meaningful and purposeful opportunities for creating multilingual and multicultural learning environment for all groups and students. The researchers point out that contextualizing the class materials to relevant and appropriate topics and themes, such as social and cultural characteristics and issues of Japan, utilizing both English and Japanese during instruction, and utilizing the hybrid language materials provided meaningful and purposeful uses for creating a multilingual and multicultural learning environment.

Third, Cutrone (2020) and Tanabe (2019) suggest that students participate in short-term study abroad programs. Cutrone points out that short-term study abroad can serve as an important motivational tool, as it shows students why they need English and inspire them to study more and or attempt longer sojourns abroad in the future. Tanabe's interview study of four female Japanese exchange students who studies at the University of Pécs in Hungary for a year suggests that visiting Hungarian homes and social networking with locals and international students played a major role in their cultural development necessary for constructing a critical self. Tanabe points out that the experiences also shaped their understanding of their own contexts where they are from. However, one of the participants in the Study, Yuuna, was

critical of her own context post return, as she felt she could not feel the value of her new skills she acquired in Hungary.

### **Teaching culture at the undergraduate level abroad**

Reports of how movies were used in teaching culture in the EFL classroom has been reported in China, Hungary, and Thailand. For China, Liu (2020) has used movies to teach about culture in five phases: (1) input and noticing through cultural introduction (e.g., rules for proposing marriage in general), (2) reflection, through thinking about conflicts (e.g., comparison of Chinese and Western concepts of love and marriage), (3) output, through cultural inquiry (e.g., teachers asking further questions such as why weddings are held at Church for western weddings), (4) noticing again through cultural contrast (e.g., etiquette in Chinese and Western weddings), and (5) reflection, though skill training (e.g., interviewing parents and grandparents about their wedding and explaining how the student plans for the students' own wedding). With EFL cultural instruction through movies in Hungary, Tanabe (2018) had students answer ICC related questions about movies that they were assigned to watch, and had them fill out ICC self-evaluation sheet at the end of the seminar. Along with movies, Tanabe had students submit two drafts of a research paper, which was an interview study about intercultural communication. Tanabe's study found that although students were conscious of certain aspects of other countries' culture and conventions of communication, they were less confident about the knowledge of their own and other countries' national culture in a broader sense. With EFL cultural instruction through movies in Thailand, Chaya and Inpin (2020) investigated the effects of Movie-Based Mobile Learning (MBML) instruction for improving Thai EFL university students' speaking skills and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and examined their attitudes toward them. The study involved first-year university students learning General English in the Faculty of Nursing at a private university in Bangkok. The study found that Movie-Based Mobile Learning instruction developed Thai university students' speaking skills and Intercultural Communicative Competence. With ICC, mean scores on the post-ICC of the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the pre-ICC in all three aspects of ICC, which included: awareness towards diverse cultures, intercultural knowledge, and the skills of interpreting and relating to other cultures.

In Thailand, songs were also used in the EFL classroom to increase students' ICC (Ayuthaya, 2018). Forty-three third and fourth-year students at one university in Bangkok over a course of 17 weeks in an English through Songs course were examined. The researcher found that songs can be an effective technique to incorporate ICC into classroom practice and increase ICC levels while also boosting L2 learning motivation. All participants reported that they increased motivation to learn English and cultural knowledge both inside and outside of class, felt more enjoyment, and were more relaxed and willing to go to class than before.

Finally, reading was mentioned as a strategy for improving EFL students' ICC, particularly in Columbia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. First, for Columbia, Gómez (2018) conducted a case study analyzing how a group of EFL learners in Colombia built critical intercultural awareness through the discussion of cultural events at reported in the media including *The New York Times*, *U.S. News*, and *The Telegraph*. The researchers found that the EFL learners not only gained new knowledge about beliefs, values, and behaviors that cause conflict in other cultural communities but also compared them critically to their own culture. Gómez claims that integrating news in EFL education can be a salient instructional method to help EFL speakers become more critical intercultural individuals through topics related to deep culture.

According to Gómez, learners started to become interested in global issues through the course. Second, for Iran, Rezaei and Naghibian (2018) investigated the role of literary texts in the development of Iranian English language learners' ICC through thirteen students in the researchers' fourteen-session course of American English Short Stories at Sharif University of Technology in Iran. The research found that even those who were very critical in class, developed a more positive attitude toward both their own and western cultures. The researchers claim that the course has been successful in imparting a more international view. Third, for Saudi Arabia, Hazaea (2020) reported findings on the development of critical intercultural awareness among EFL students in a critical reading enrichment course for first-year male Saudi university students. The researcher found that participants demonstrated balanced intercultural awareness associated with the discourse of food diversity, appreciated cultures of the self and others, and demonstrated appropriate intercultural knowledge. Hazaea points out that as a result of training students to analyze intercultural texts, they could gain skills to analyze and interpret intercultural discourse.

### **Suggestions for teaching culture at the undergraduate level abroad made by researchers in the existing literature**

Two major themes related to teaching culture at the undergraduate level abroad have been identified in the literature from 2016-2021 (i.e., eight papers on ProQuest and eleven papers on ERIC). They include: (1) suggestions for administrators and teachers (Altan, 2018; Arcagok & Yimaz, 2020; Chen & Bang, 2020; Jawas, 2020; Mai, 2021; Lee, 2020; Lei, 2021; López-Rocha, 2016; Manuel & Dimas, 2019; Weda & Atmowardoyo, 2021; Sundh, 2018; Vo, 2017) and (2) suggestions for teaching culture related to speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Almuhailib, 2019; Cheewasukthaworn & Suwanarak, 2017; Gómez, 2018; Maliki, Lamkhanter, & Housni, 2017; Namaziandost, Sabzevari, & Hashemifardnia, 2018; Pinzón & Norely, 2021; Rana Khan, 2018). The two major themes will be explained in separate sections hereafter.

#### **Suggestions for administrators and teachers**

Jawas (2020) claims that teaching of culture must extend beyond factual learning. In classrooms, related to this point, Manuel and Dimas (2019) point out that it is the teacher's job to promote language learning by having them use their own words that ultimately unveils the complexity and richness of culture. When using textbooks, Mai (2021) points out that although current curricula use the original varieties of English such as British or American English to guide learners, that does not mean that varietal features of the languages should be ignored. Mai suggests that language teachers should act as gatekeepers to correct learners' errors while being aware of the language variations and learn to distinguish between errors and variants to nurture language learners' reactivity. López-Rocha (2016) points out that ICC teaching should be interactive in order to foster interactions and discussions that lead to self-awareness, openness, and transformation.

Altan (2018) suggests that pre-service teachers be proactive in attempting to understand more about foreigners and learn from them through interactions to build their own ICC. Arcagok and Yizman's (2020) study that involved pre-service teachers as participants elicited specific suggestions from pre-service teachers for building intercultural sensitivity, which included: (1) introducing different cultures in programs, (2) providing a course on culture as an elective course, (3) including pen friendship programs, (4) introducing articles, (6) assigning reading tasks, and (7) adding courses that cover language and culture. Sundh (2018) suggests teachers

who are teaching preservice teachers to use video-conferencing as a tool to establish contacts among preservice teachers in different locations and to develop intercultural understanding. Some topics that may be discussed are teaching and learning at schools, teacher education at universities, and teachers' working conditions (Sundh, 2018). Sundh points out that teachers facilitating video conferencing do follow-up activities to ensure that interaction among preservice teachers do not lead to simplifications and misunderstandings. Lee (2020) examined the current state of a cross-cultural distance learning program CCDLP) for learning English in the EFL context that has been running since 1998 among four universities in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, and with 58 respondents mostly Korean females responded that interacting with students at other universities was helpful. However, Lee points out that the program and courses need to be regularly monitored for quality control. Lee suggests that checklists be made and surveys be administered to students and the faculty involved.

As for curriculum, which is related to administration, Lei (2021) suggests that universities emphasize ICC development in teaching, and provide more opportunities to communicate interculturally for pre-service English teachers. López-Rocha claims that ICC needs to be incorporated in the language curriculum if educators hope to help students develop an appreciation for the language and culture studied, an awareness of culture, and the development of skills that allow students to be competent and adaptable communicators. Chen and Bang (2020) point out after investigating how preparation for study abroad affects the academic success of East Asian undergraduate students in the U.S. universities based on interviews from 12 participants who were from China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan that neither the preparation programs in their homelands nor ESL programs in the United States offered courses related to American culture, and students fail to realize the importance of understanding American culture until they come to the United States. On a macro level, Weda and Atmowardoyo (2021) underscores the importance of Cross-Cultural Competence as a cornerstone to build social harmony and peace in a multicultural society.

### **Suggestions for teaching culture related to speaking, writing, listening, and reading**

For speaking, one teacher who was a participant in Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak's (2017) investigation of sixteen Thai EFL teachers' perceptions toward ICC suggested that if students are curious about understanding more about the culture of the interlocutor and respect foreign cultures and knowledge of the learners' own cultures, students can talk about multiple topics. This suggests the importance of input to motivate students to speak. Similarly, for reading, Mailiki, Lamkhanter, and Housni (2018) point out that "[u]ntil readers are willing to engage in appreciating the cultural values in the text, mediating between their own culture and the newly introduced traits through the text, they will never enjoy other human learning experiences" (p. 97). Gómez (2018) proposed the use of genre-based learning through two samples of genres, how the skills of discovery, interpreting, and relating can be articulated, complemented, and enhanced gradually through critical thinking tasks. Pinzón & Norely (2021) suggest that EFL teachers should "begin with short stories, comics, recipes, menus, songs, or excerpts taken from books to get students accustomed to having contact with 'real' language" (p. 44). Almuhailib (2019) suggests that teachers can have students (1) compare texts of students' L1 to the target language and (2) understand L2 cultural norms, expectations, beliefs, and ways of thinking including notions of gender equality, individualism, and understanding issues from multiple contrasting perspectives. Almuhailib points out that each written language has its own unique rhetorical patterns in terms of style, structure, and content. For example, Almuhailib points out that in some languages such as Arabic, the audience is given the burden of understanding the text, while in other languages,

such as English, the writer is expected to clearly explain concepts to the audience. For listening, Namaziandost, Sabzevari, and Hashemifardnia (2018) point out that Iranian EFL course books do not sufficiently get students ready for intercultural communication because they focus on language forms and do not improve students' awareness of the target language culture. The researchers point out that language learners wanting to enhance their listening comprehension should have exposure to target culture materials. Rana Khan (2018), based on an investigation of 75 non-native English teachers (N=38) and native English teachers (N=37) at various universities and colleges, private and public points out the importance of incorporating materials and activities in which speakers with different accents are included. Rana Khan also emphasizes the importance of mutual intelligibility between the teacher and the student.

### **Implications for undergraduate level EFL teachers and administrators in Japan**

For educators teaching EFL at the undergraduate level in Japan, suggestions for building ICC from scholars and educators abroad suggest that educators themselves become interested in other cultures, recognize the importance of including various cultures and accents, and learn to recognize opportunities to educate students about culture while building students' linguistic competence. Some of the ways that educators can consider building students' intercultural competence are using movies, songs, comics, and works of literature for students to become interested in culture outside of their own. These sources of listening and reading can be used as tools to then have students work on their writing skills based on reflection, and speaking skills through discussions and presentations.

For administrators in EFL, it is important to consider whether EFL faculty members from diverse cultural backgrounds are hired, and given the departmental goals, whether it would make sense to establish a required or elective course on culture. What universities abroad a particular university in Japan is affiliated with can inevitably shape EFL courses and extracurricular offerings. The inevitable impact of all the pieces of the curriculum makes periodic faculty meetings for all EFL faculty to understand the curriculum and what other faculty are doing in their classes reasonable. Allocating time for faculty meetings can assist administrators in refining the curriculum to align with departmental aims.

### **Implications for undergraduate level EFL teachers and administrators outside of Japan**

For administrators of EFL programs at the undergraduate level abroad, what can be considered from how culture is taught at the undergraduate level in Japan is providing educational opportunities outside of the classroom including opportunities for short-term study abroad programs lasting two to four weeks and longer exchange programs. Similar to the suggestions for Japanese undergraduate programs, periodic faculty meetings for faculty members to understand what other EFL teachers are doing in their classrooms, and for faculty members to teach with the understanding of the curriculum is recommended.

With teaching culture in class, along with the use of movies, songs, comics, and works of literature, educators might also consider having students engage in fieldwork in which they are asked to interview those outside of the classroom and write papers based on fieldwork based on a synthesis of the cultural concepts taught in class, readings introduced in class, students' own review of literature and film on a certain aspect of culture, and findings from fieldwork. If short and long-term study programs are to be included as part of the curriculum, such inclusion should be considered when teachers prepare for EFL courses for building



linguistic and cultural competence. Teachers might also consider ways to create a multicultural and linguistic environment in their courses on culture.

## **Conclusion**

This paper compared how culture is taught for EFL undergraduate students at Japanese universities with how culture is taught for EFL undergraduate students abroad. The comparison was made in order to identify best practices for teaching a course on culture for EFL undergraduate students in Japan and abroad based on a literature review from 2016 to 2021. In Japan, at the undergraduate level, much of cultural teaching has relied on opportunities outside of the classroom, including study abroad programs (Cutrone, 2020; Ikeda, 2020; Isa, 2016; Nakasato, 2017) and intensive English camp (Noguchi, 2019). On the other hand, undergraduate level teaching of culture abroad has had a focus on teaching about culture through movies (Chaya & Inpin, 2020; Liu, 2020; Tanabe, 2018) and reading (Gómez, 2018; Hazaea, 2020; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018). Suggestions from Japan have included teaching about local ethnic diversity (Saki, 2021) and creating a multilingual and multicultural environment (Koshiyama, Alipoga, & Hou, 2019), and having students participate in short and long-term study abroad programs (Cutrone, 2020; Tanabe, 2019). On the other hand, suggestions for cultural teaching at the undergraduate level abroad fell into two categories: suggestions for administrators and teachers, and suggestions for teaching culture related to speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Implications for teachers and administrators were also made based on the literature from 2016 to 2021.

The best practices for teaching culture in both Japan and abroad undergraduate-level EFL contexts include: (1) having administrators consider whether to include or maintain a course on culture as an elective or a requirement based on departmental goals, (2) having administrators consider hiring faculty from various cultural backgrounds to teach courses on culture, (3) having administrators consider options for opportunities for students to learn about culture outside of the classroom including: (a) short-term study abroad programs, (b) long-term exchange programs, and (c) short-term English camps that can be a more economical alternative to study abroad programs. Administrators may also consider (4) diversity in students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds for class placement. Additionally, (5) setting up periodic faculty meetings for teachers is recommended for administrators to understand their EFL teachers teach culture, and if they have stand-alone courses on culture, how that is taught by each faculty. This relates to suggestions for teachers, which is to have teachers (1) participate in periodic faculty meetings to understand how culture is being taught by other EFL faculty members and to understand students' opportunities to learn about culture through the university's outside of class programs such as exchange programs. Another suggestion is to (2) consider various ways to teach about culture prior to finalizing course syllabi, which includes, teaching through movies, reading comics, news, literary works, having students engage in fieldwork and write research papers, preparing students for study-abroad programs or short-term intensive English camps if their institutions have such programs, and having students write, discuss, and make presentations. Finally, teachers may opt to (3) conduct action research in their own classrooms to continue to improve their skills of teaching about culture and to fill the gap of existing literature, that can contribute to the improvement of teaching for teacher-researchers in their own cultural contexts and abroad.

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