

# A Linguistic and Cultural Approach to Reading in JFL\*

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## Abstract

Many studies advocate the use of literature as an optimal way of supporting intercultural learning. In particular focus on cultural awareness (CA) skills has gained much prominence and attention in recent years. From the viewpoint that Japanese language learners could equally benefit from the usage of literature in the Japanese class, this study argues that using canonical texts can enhance students' linguistic and cultural awareness, and develop intercultural connections. For this case study, the story *Botchan* by Natsume Soseki was used in two classes of international students at a private university. The results of this study indicate that this story and the introduced method were effective, creating cultural experiences while exploring all four language skills.

英語教育の先行研究の多くは、文学は効果的な異文化間学習支援教材の一つであると提唱している。とりわけ、近年文学教材による文化的気づきの育成が期待され、注目を浴びている。英語学習者と同様、日本語学習者も文学教材を用いた日本語教育の恩恵を享受することができるはずであるという立場から、本研究は古典とされている日本文学テキストの活用が学習者の言語的及び文化的気づきを高め、異文化間理解を促進させることができると表示する。研究目的の達成に向けて、本研究では私立大学における外国人留学生の日本語クラス二つに、夏目漱石の小説『坊っちゃん』を用いて、検証を行った。検証した結果、用いた文学テキスト及び導入した学習法は学生が充実できるようなものであり、異文化理解と言語4技能の習得につながったことが明らかとなった。

**Keywords:** Japanese language education, Japanese literature, canon, *Botchan*, reading

Despite the growing attention to the aspect of cultural studies and cultural awareness in language teaching, “culture” is still frequently being understood as factual cultural information. The approach the author proposes for providing cultural knowledge through language as a means to enhance cultural awareness (CA) in students transcends the traditional boundaries of culture in language, and embraces language as culture. With a growing focus on

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intercultural communicative competence as a central goal of foreign language teaching, the interconnectedness of language and culture cannot be ignored (Fenner, 2001; Risager, 2007). Many studies advocate the use of literature as an optimal way of supporting intercultural learning (Hall, 2015; Kramersch, 2013; Paran, 2008). In particular focus on cultural awareness skills has gained much prominence and attention in recent years (Fenner, 2015). In Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) education, however, research in literature in language learning is still very limited (Richings, 2016a, 2016b; リッチングス, 2018). From the viewpoint that Japanese language learners could equally benefit from the usage of literature, the author has examined several approaches to introducing literary texts, including the usage of canonical texts.

This paper introduces one of these approaches by demonstrating how a linguistic and cultural approach could be incorporated in the JFL reading class. This study argues that using canonical texts can have a positive outcome on students' interest in reading Japanese literature while enhancing both linguistic and cultural awareness skills and developing intercultural connections. For this case study, the story *Botchan* by Natsume Soseki was used in two classes of international students at a private university in 2016 and 2017. This paper presents the materials and methods used, and examines whether the usage of canonical texts of cultural significance could be an innovative and effective way of encouraging students' Japanese language learning and boosting cultural awareness by focusing on what cultural resonances can be found today.

## 1. Framework Rationale

Many scholars have observed the paramount role of literature in developing linguistic knowledge and cultural awareness in language learners (Bredella, 2000; Hanauer, 2001; Kramersch, 2003). Reading literature not only helps learners comprehend linguistic structures but also enables them to engage with the content on an emotional and cultural level. Risager states that "culture pedagogy normally refers to language teaching with a general purpose, since it is here that 'language and culture' occur as a combined object for teaching" (2007, p. 5). Risager further states that it is widely approved that language teaching should deal with both language and culture, although this might be more the case in theory than in practice. Most importantly, she maintains that the usage of written and oral forms of literature is a relevant portal in the language and culture pedagogy context, in the sense that through literature, learners can participate in "foreign experiences," which she describes as "other ways of living, other ways of seeing the world, other perceptions, perspectives and states of mind" (p. 6). Using Risager's theory as a basis, this empirical study is undertaken to examine how language and culture could be used as a combined object for teaching to enhance both linguistic and cultural awareness skills in learners.

The method used for this study is an integrated approach combining the language awareness approach proposed by Chan (1999) and cultural approach by Carter and Long (1991). The former focuses on building learners' awareness of linguistic patterns while developing language skills. According to Carter (2003), language awareness is the ability to recognize language patterns and its functions with the ultimate purpose of building language sensitivity. The latter concentrates on providing cultural background knowledge of the target language (Hanauer, 2001) while enabling learners to become aware of certain values and beliefs from different perspectives. In order to achieve the purpose of this study it was essential to balance these approaches, applying both with equal importance by providing activities that reflect the features of each.

## 2. Context

### 2.1. Participants and Text

The participants were two groups of Japanese language learners at a large private university in western Japan: one high-intermediate level class of nine students and one advanced level class of 13 students. These Japanese language classes are compulsory for international students and are conducted in an all-Japanese environment. The class using literature (international students have two Japanese language classes per week) met once a week for 14 times and lasted one semester only. The primary goal of the instructor was to examine if the reading experience with a canonical text after one semester was in any way successful in terms of linguistic and cultural awareness enhancement in Japanese language learners. The literary work *Botchan* was selected on the basis of its prominence as Japanese canon and its cultural content. Also, the fact that a manga version (Masuyama, 2011) was available for Japanese language learners was a decisive factor in using the text. For reasons of difficulty degree, the manga version was used as main text and the novel as supplementary text; the manga version was used in class and the novel version for individual reading at home.

Since the story was published more than a hundred years ago, undoubtedly a number of cultural values have changed. However, as Risager (2007) advocates, literature is an important portal to develop awareness “of the fact that other people in other cultural, social and historical contexts can have universally human experiences that are very similar to one’s own” (p. 6-7). Thus, even though the cultural, social, and historical context of literary texts may contain differences, it can be assumed that for example core values such as honesty, self-sacrifice, integrity can be found in “culture” today, thus creating resonances over time. Therefore, *Botchan* can be considered as a literary work providing universal linguistic and cultural elements for the Japanese language class, nevertheless the fact that it is known not as a contemporary but classic work in Japanese literature.

The title *Botchan* is the name given to the protagonist by Kiyō, the housekeeper who has looked after him since he was born. “Botchan” grows up in the city of Tokyo, always getting himself into trouble with his reckless (*muteppō*) character. However, only Kiyō addresses him with unconditional affection and keeps reminding him he should be proud of his honest and straightforward disposition. After graduating, he takes up a teaching post in a middle school in Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture. Coming from Tokyo, it is his first time living in the countryside and experiencing all aspects of country life. There he learns that the teaching job he had expected to be easy is in fact not as cool as he had envisioned. He finds himself surrounded by scammers, and the students do not respect him. It is a humorous tale with morality as its main theme and is based on the author’s personal experiences as a teacher in Matsuyama. This story takes place in a time when Japan gradually gets overwhelmed with Western thought and values while struggling to keep its national traits and cultural aspects.

### 2.2. Procedure

The class procedure was as follows. As the novel contains 11 chapters, the syllabus was organized to cover one chapter per class with an introductory and review class at the beginning and end of the semester. Finally, one class was attributed to presentations. In order to make this reading class experience successful and meaningful, it was important to establish the reading purpose of this non-contemporary work. As stated above, the aim of this study was to examine if the usage of canonical texts of cultural significance could be an encouraging language learning tool in the Japanese class for boosting students’ linguistic and cultural awareness. After explaining this purpose to the students, the instructor went over the process and specific

content of each class. With the integrated approach framework mentioned above in mind, the instructor divided each lesson in three sections: pre-reading (20 minutes), while-reading (20 minutes), and post-reading (40 minutes).

The pre-reading section was primarily to increase students' interest in the story by activating especially cultural background knowledge, and make the context relevant to their present Japanese environment. For example, in the pre-reading activity for Chapter 2, questions about the geography of Japan were provided with the aim of giving students an idea of where and in what historical circumstances the story took place (Appendix A). Another example is Chapter 3 and 4 in which onomatopoeia occupy a great deal of the linguistic content. Onomatopoeia (*onomatope*) are sound symbolic words or words that represent sounds. These could be animal and human sounds, or describing states and emotions. Japanese is a language known for its richness in onomatopoeia forming a characteristic element of not only the language but also its culture. Intrinsically, activities with onomatopoeia provide a convenient content for enhancing students' linguistic and cultural awareness skills.

In the while-reading section, students first read the text individually, whereupon the instructor verified and modified predictions made about the meaning of difficult words and concepts in the text. The purpose of this section was to focus students' attention on main expressions and ideas that were considered of importance to the overall comprehension of the novel. Chapter 5, for example, contains abstract ideas and metaphorical expressions referring to artistic elements such as art. Like Chapter 5, some passages require guidance to construct meaning in order to pursue the reading process.

The post-reading section was the longest and of primary importance in that the students were given the opportunity to explain their reasoning for certain predictions, make connections between sequence events, and offer responses to the text. Activities in this section included text comprehension and individual response questions. The comprehension questions took the format of multiple-choice questions, open-ended questions, and true-or-false questions among others. The individual response questions were formed in such a way the students could visualize characters and events in the text while integrating new information with existing cultural background knowledge. This section gave students the opportunity to respond to the reading in various ways (Appendix B). The other chapters of the book ideally contained other linguistic and cultural content that could easily be used within this integrated framework.

At the end of the semester, the students prepared a short presentation explaining their thoughts about the reading experience and were asked to explicitly express how they thought they could apply and extend the experience to their personal life situations. Lastly, in the final class, a short multiple-choice and open-ended questionnaire was administered to examine the implications of this study. The questionnaire contained items regarding the general organization of the textbook (i.e. the manga form) such as design, unites and sections, graphic elements, drawing style, and speech style, and items enquiring about the task design such as the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading sections and their respective content, and learning outcomes.

### 3. Results

The first aspect revealed by this study is the large percentage of students liking the book format and the story itself. All students said they enjoyed it and thought the general organization was very good (Appendix C). Ninety four percent said they thought it was a suitable level and 90% said they thought the manga style was what they liked. Some students felt the content of the story was a little too simplified and detached from the original version (*genbun*) because of its

manga form. On the other hand, some students mentioned that the graphics exactly portrayed the emotional state of the characters and their situation, which made it easier to understand the content of the original text. Students' answers about the tasks showed that they were overall satisfactory. Ninety percent of the students enjoyed the activities. Many students said that each activity helped them to understand the content better, whereas some students mentioned that they would have preferred reading the original text in class and learn how to read it more fluently rather than spending time doing all the activities.

Figure 1 below shows the results of the multiple-choice items, questioning students about learning outcomes. The questions were designed to ask students what specific skills they thought they had acquired and to what extent. The answers clearly confirmed that students felt their four language skills had improved. In particular reading (77.8%) and writing (77.8%) skills have a high percentage. This could be the result of the many reading comprehension questions and writing practice that were included in the activities. A few students did not agree, saying that the level of certain exercises was sometimes too easy. Also, many students felt their listening and speaking skills had improved to some degree, although speaking skills (61.1%) more than listening skills (55.6%). Thus, it can be noted that these results are supportive of the opinion that literature can help enhance learners' linguistic skills.

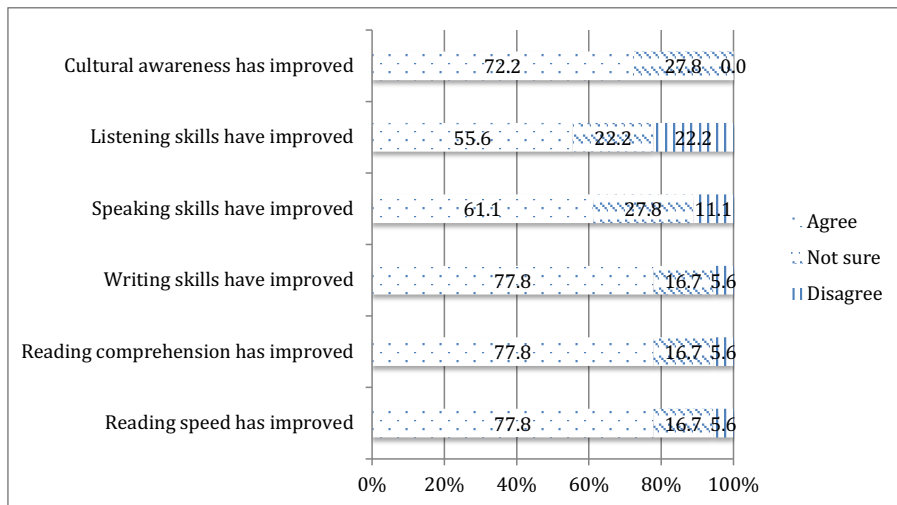


Figure 1: Student perceptions of learning outcomes.

Regarding cultural awareness, as Figure 1 shows, 72.2% of the students perceived an increase in their understanding of cultural concepts and stated agreement to this question. Some students (27.8%) were uncertain, however no student disagreed. This result implies that through reading this classic novel students were able to familiar themselves with cultural aspects and perceive this practice as being beneficial to the learning process of Japanese. One student commented that what she acquired most beside linguistic skills is an understanding of the fact that the way people behave and react to various situations does not change over time or regardless of culture. Another student noted that reading this story helped him be more conscious of how and why Japanese people behave the way they do, and first reflect on what a certain conduct implies rather than just criticize it from the outset. Some students were able to identify old Japanese cultural values such as respect, duty, loyalty, and honor among others, which are cultural resonances that can be found in Japanese society even today. After close

evaluation of the findings, it can be suggested that this story and this integrated learning practice with literature were satisfactory, creating real-like cultural experiences while exploring all four language skills.

#### 4. Discussion

Firstly, it should be noted that the present study dealt with a limited number of participants and one JFL situation. Also, for further research, the usage of a different text could have generated different results, which is an important factor to consider. A comparative study between the usage of a classic and modern work for example could provide more details. Nevertheless, the results of this study confirmed previous research about the usage of literature in the foreign language classroom, including JFL (Hall, 2015; Richings, 2016a, 2016b). Notably, that literature can enhance learners' linguistic and cultural awareness skills and can benefit the learning process. More importantly is the fact that these results can be obtained by employing relatively older stories or canon texts. Overall, this study revealed that literature is an important means by which learners can experience universal human emotions similar to their own and through which learners can observe the world from multifarious viewpoints. Through exploring how literature is perceived and can actually be used in an JFL environment, the author hopes to provide reasons for using alternative instruction methods in the future.

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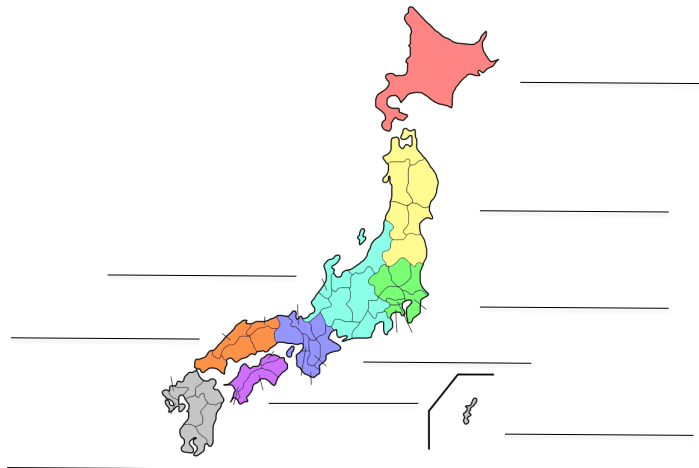
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## Appendix A

第2章を読む前に、下記<sup>かき</sup>の質問に答えましょう。

① 吹き出しの清<sup>きよ</sup>の台詞<sup>せりふ</sup>を読みましょう。清は何を心配しているのでしょうか。

② 日本には4つの島<sup>しま</sup>(北海道、本州、四国、九州)があるとわれ、9つの地域<sup>ちづ</sup>に分かれています。地図に地域の名前を書き入れましょう。また、東京<sup>はこね</sup>と箱根はどこでしょうか。



(Map courtesy of

[http://mapsof.net/uploads/static-maps/regions\\_and\\_prefectures\\_of\\_japan\\_2.png](http://mapsof.net/uploads/static-maps/regions_and_prefectures_of_japan_2.png))

③ 登場人物<sup>とうじょうじんぶつ</sup>の性格<sup>せいかく</sup>を表す言葉<sup>ことば</sup>です。もう一度、意味<sup>いみ</sup>を調べましょう。

- 1) 策略家<sup>さくりやく</sup>
- 2) おとなしい
- 3) 正義感<sup>せいぎかん</sup>が強い
- 4) おしゃべり
- 5) 事なかれ主義<sup>こと しゅぎ</sup>

### Appendix B

① 建前 (one's official stance) と本音 (one's real intention) という言葉を知っていますか。次の台詞は、建前ですか、本音ですか。話し合みましょう。

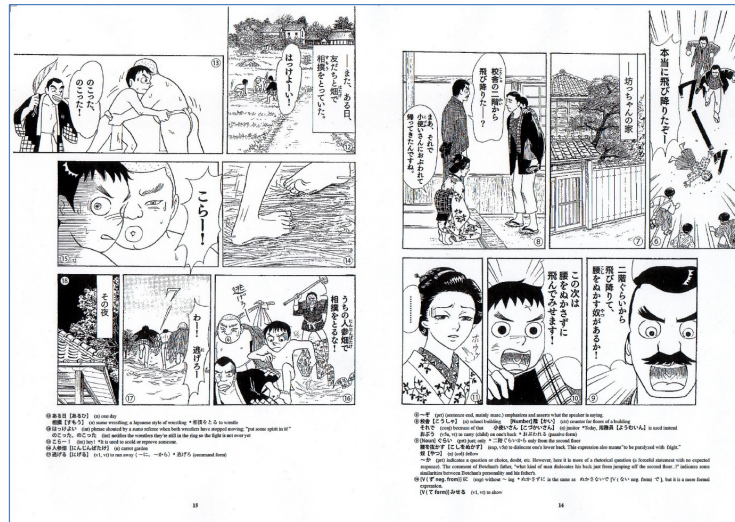
- 校長：「教師は生徒の模範になれ」(第2章コマ25) [建前・本音]
- 坊っちゃん：「この辞令はお返します」(第2章コマ31) [建前・本音]
- 清：「坊っちゃんがまっすぐでいいご気性だからです」(第2章コマ43) [建前・本音]
- いか銀：「あなたもかなりのご風流とお見受けしました」(第3章コマ26) [建前・本音]
- 生徒：「しかし四杯は食いすぎぞなもし」(第3章コマ45) [建前・本音]

② 坊っちゃんはまだまだ新米教師で生徒とどのようにつきあっていかわかりません。坊っちゃんに生徒との関係をよくするため、どんなアドバイスがありますか。

③ 忘れられない先生がいますか。どんな先生でしたか。

④ 道後温泉は日本でもっとも古い温泉のひとつだと言われています。日本の温泉でもいいこと、してはいけないことについて話し合みましょう。みなさんの国には、温泉がありますか。どんなルールがありますか。

### Appendix C



<http://www.yumani.co.jp/Botchan-en/pagesample/>  
Used with permission from Yumani Shobō, Tokyo.

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