How to Reach the World Outside: Suggestions for Fostering Intercultural Understanding in Japanese Elementary School English Classrooms

RACHEL DAVIDSON [a]

[a] University of Cambridge, UK
Email: rachel.k.davidson@icloud.com

Abstract

As Japan prepares for the 2020 Summer Olympics, the elementary school English curriculum is rapidly changing, with new textbooks and more class hours devoted to English education. These language classes have the potential to clarify and improve students' perceptions of global cultures, including their own. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to provide practical suggestions for Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs), Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), and Japanese homeroom teachers to foster intercultural communication and understanding in their Grade 5 and 6 classrooms. Elaborating upon ideas in (Davidson & Liu, 2018), this article proposes that students may develop intercultural competencies through authentic materials, guided in-class discussions, English Notebook assignments, and local engagement with international interlocutors. While tailored to the Japanese elementary school classroom, these suggestions may be adapted to other EFL contexts as well.

Keywords: intercultural understanding, intercultural pedagogy, Japan, EFL education, elementary school

Introduction

Globalization continues to shape the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education landscape throughout the world, and the effects are strongly felt in Japan as the country prepares for the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. English will become a formal academic subject in Japanese elementary schools in April 2020, and the government has allocated greater funding for specialized English teachers who will support homeroom teachers in providing more robust instruction (Ikeda, Imai, & Takeuchi, 2019; Japan Times, 2018). Moreover, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) recently mandated new English textbooks, which build on the material from

previous Grade 5 and 6 texts while expanding the curriculum to Grades 3 and 4 (MEXT, 2017c, 2018). This expansion and formalization of the curriculum at the elementary level is not simply aimed at developing English language skills but is also closely linked to the broader agenda of "deepening understanding" of culture (MEXT, 2010, p. 1), and developing Japanese citizens capable of engaging in intercultural dialogue and making contributions on the global stage (Ryan, 2009; Yamada, 2010). These recent and rapid educational changes mirror discourses within the field of language education, which emphasize that engaging with cultural difference and developing intercultural understanding are integral to developing foreign language abilities (Borghetti, 2019; Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat, 2007).

Addressing intercultural understanding through language education naturally requires that teachers have a clear conception of "culture" and vision for developing intercultural understanding; however, both of these notions are complex and widely contested (Risager, 2018). For language educators, one difficulty is that culture is often superficially treated as the products and practices associated with national groups, which means that intercultural learning is often reduced to a matter of memorizing facts about "foreigners." Many scholars in the field of intercultural language learning argue for a more interpretative approach, with a focus on developing students' awareness of how frameworks of understanding and value systems shape the interpretation of actions and symbols in a range of contexts within and beyond national cultures (e.g., Borghetti & Beaven, 2018; Diaz, 2013; Kearney, 2015; Kramsch, 2011; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; McConachy, 2018). The idea of intercultural understanding, then, involves becoming attuned to meaning-making processes while developing skills such as relativizing the self, valuing others, and building critical cultural awareness in relation to a variety of cultural phenomena (Byram, 1997). Interculturality, the state of mind in which one develops intercultural understanding, has been called "a reflexive awareness of Self and Other" (Holliday, 2018a, p. 6), in which "the focus should be on self among others rather than the nature of difference between national or other large cultures" (Holliday, 2018a, p. 4). Interculturality helps students position themselves in a world rife with complex relations to other people, communities (linguistic and otherwise), and nations. Language education is uniquely positioned to contribute to this goal of developing individuals who can not only communicate through multiple linguistic codes but also constructively engage with cultural diversity and move beyond surface-level understandings of culture (Witte, 2014).

One of the main challenges faced by classroom teachers when attempting to promote intercultural learning is that textbook depictions of culture are often oversimplified and problematic (Low-Beer, 2001; Messekher, 2014; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004; Yamada, 2010; Yuen, 2011). The Japanese context is no exception. Davidson & Liu (2018) analyzed two textbooks used across Japan in Grades 5 and 6 and found that MEXT's 2017 English curriculum lacked a focus on cultural practices and perspectives. While visuals of Japanese products and persons were abundant, the government-approved textbooks did not contain content which would encourage students to consider the specificities of how Japanese and non-Japanese people view and conduct themselves in relation to others. This is a missed opportunity for students to develop intercultural understanding. Long-term use of such textbooks which promote superficial engagement with culture may actually bias students' perspectives and compromise their understanding of their home culture in relation to others (Song, 2013). In order to promote positive personal, social, and academic development, EFL teachers in Japan should remain cognizant of the rather superficial and potentially stereotypical ways that the curriculum and classroom activities portray cultures, both within and beyond the local national context.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to provide practical suggestions for Grade 5 and 6 EFL activities which could prompt deeper engagement with the curriculum and contribute to intercultural learning, in spite of problematic materials and challenging classroom circumstances. Adding opportunities to respond to cultural representations in textbooks and to interact with diverse interlocutors will allow

both students and teachers to develop intercultural understanding. These suggestions are informed by several years of practical experience teaching elementary school English in Japan, as well as discussion with likeminded colleagues.

Pedagogical Foundations

There are three main foundations to the pedagogical suggestions offered in this paper. The first concerns the conceptualization of cultural representations in learning materials, via the "four Ps" framework of products, persons, practices, and perspectives (Yuen, 2011). Products refer to symbols and physical artifacts produced by a country; persons, to the members of a cultural group or society; practices, to customs and aspects of daily life; and perspectives, to inspirations, myths, and worldviews. Consequently, the pedagogical suggestions are intended to help increase attention to practices and perspectives: the two Ps which are most conducive to promoting reflection on the meaning of actions and symbols, and which are typically neglected in language textbooks.

The second pedagogical foundation is the notion of a "culture-general" approach, which contends that intercultural education should focus on the broad factors influencing communication among people from various cultural groups, rather than limiting the focus to "culture-specific" ideas which only apply to one group (Diaz & Moore, 2018). This is not to say that learning should exclude a focus on particular cultures; rather, any focus on particular cultures is best used as an entry point for shifting to broader cultural comparisons and engagement with cultural diversity at multiple levels. This holistic approach complements MEXT's current designation of elementary school EFL education as *gaikokugo katsudou*, or "Foreign Language Activities," wherein the learning goals include "[being] aware of various points of view and ways of thinking," and "[deepening] the experiential understanding of the language and cultures of Japan and foreign countries" (MEXT, 2010, 2017d). Both current and previous elementary school English textbooks feature images from various non-Japanese cultures, including English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries (MEXT, 2012, 2017a). Therefore, in order to prepare students to communicate with diverse interlocutors in their daily life and travels – beyond those people merely depicted in the textbooks – it is advised to take a general approach by considering multiple types of interactions, and incorporating all four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The third pedagogical foundation concerns the language in which the following suggestions could effectively take place. Elementary school EFL classes in Japan are often co-taught by Japanese homeroom teachers and foreign-born Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). While there are cases where elementary school homeroom teachers may not feel confident in English, ALTs may not be proficient in Japanese, and students themselves may not be comfortable beyond the simple textbook phrases already learned, such as "What do you want to watch?" (MEXT, 2017b, p. 42; Sakamoto, 2014), classroom participants can adopt a flexible stance to the creative use and integration of languages in order to facilitate intercultural learning. Accordingly, the suggested activities and discussion questions provide a unique opportunity for students to practice both English and Japanese language skills, to actively compare modes of expression across languages, and to shape their emerging bilingual identities (Bauer & Guerrero, 2016).

The following sections begin with in-class recommendations for authentic materials and subsequent class discussions, and progress to out-of-class activities including English Notebooks and localized engagement with international interlocutors.

Supplementing Textbooks with Authentic Materials

As suggested in (Davidson & Liu, 2018), one way of making up for the limited range of cultural content in textbooks prescribed by MEXT is to make creative use of authentic materials, particularly those including common expressions, literature, and interesting facts. These days, there are many free and open-source resources online, which can be added to the curriculum and circulated among teachers at little to no cost. For example, YouTube and TeacherTube users have created countless videos with cultural stories and songs suited to a variety of grade levels, from preschool to high school and university. Sites such as LinguaHouse also offer lesson plans, multimedia content, and handouts on current events, as well as cultural hallmarks such as Easter (LinguaHouse.com, 2019). In addition, story books and fairy tales are an excellent way to increase cultural exposure in a cognitively enriching and engaging manner, particularly if children are encouraged to take up the perspectives of diverse characters and creatively interpret actions and meanings contained within the stories (de Bruijn, 2017; Harris, 2019; Haven, 2007; Vraštilová, 2018). While teachers would need to confirm that these materials are suited to the learners' current level of cognitive and linguistic development, even simple exposure to pictorial or textual representations of different cultural practices can provide a stimulus for students to inquire into different ways of experiencing daily life and seeing the world.

One model for introducing cultural practices through real-world cultural content and interesting facts appears in the textbook An Integrated Approach to Intermediate Japanese, wherein each chapter includes a page of "Culture Notes." These pages provide information such as the implications of everyday Japanese greetings and honorifics, and appropriate ways to address friends (Miura & McGloin, 2008, p. 24). Such details would also add personally relevant and practical examples of international practices and perspectives to elementary school EFL textbooks.

However, it should be noted that the provision of authentic materials does not in itself encourage deep or critical engagement, nor intercultural understanding. The current *We Can!* textbooks for Grades 5 and 6 include a "Let's Watch and Think" section which corresponds to select videos in the digital version of the textbook; however, the main question asked of the students is *wakatta koto*, or "things you understood" (MEXT, 2017b, p. 51). While it is possible that this question was meant to encourage linguistic rather than cultural understanding, this vague phrase remains the textbook's closest approximation to inviting deeper cultural dialogue, following the trend of textbooks which focus on comprehension rather than interpretive questions (McConachy, 2009). The following sections will explore tasks and forms of questioning that could be used to engage students in reflective ways and deepen cultural understanding.

Promoting Reflection through Class Discussions

Given that language learners are rarely encouraged to reflect on cultural representations within textbooks (Canale, 2016), classroom discussions provide a useful way of encouraging students to pay more conscious attention to cultural content, make cultural comparisons, and begin to explore their views of self and others (Davidson & Liu, 2018). Pedagogically speaking, small group discussions followed by open class sharing would be well suited to collective meaning-making about culture. Even shy individuals would likely feel more comfortable testing their ideas in a safe space among a few peers, before having the option to share with the entire class (Trumbul, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000). This method of discussion is a slight departure from typical Japanese classroom practices, which are characterized by modesty, ritual, and the expectation to defer to authority (Anderson & Wolfe, 2009; Yamagishi *et al*., 2012). Whereas elementary school class discussions in Japan typically have the implicit end goal of a consensus, which anticipates conventions of adult decision-making (Anderson & Wolfe, 2009), cultural discussions in English class provide an alternative where absolute

consensus is not necessary and multiple perspectives are welcomed. Before engaging with any specific materials, teachers may wish to stimulate general thinking about language and culture through questions likely to be familiar to students, such as those below:

- What do you like about the culture of your community? Your school? Japan?
- Do you want to travel abroad? Why or why not?
- Why do we study English?
- In what ways do you think [cultural practice or perspective] is similar to your own experience?
- In what ways do you think [cultural practice or perspective] is different from your own experience?
- What do you enjoy the most about studying different cultures?
- Do you think it is important for people to maintain cultural habits that have a long history? Why or why not?

While aiming to maintain an open space for new ideas and a non-judgmental classroom atmosphere, teachers can begin to prompt students to provide reasons for their thoughts, such as by asking, "Why do you think that?" and "Does anyone else have a different view?" (Warren, Wakefield, & Mills, 2013). Through exposure to different perspectives and reasons for their perspectives within groups, students can begin to understand that cultural matters are very much open to interpretation, even when students might come from the same country. Throughout the process, teachers should reassure students that there are no right or wrong answers, and it is also acceptable to share open-ended thoughts, which may lead to further questions.

After promoting general discussion, teachers may then attempt to incorporate a more focused frame for intercultural reflection and comparison by choosing visual (e.g., photographs, drawings) or textual (e.g., readings, sample dialogues) representations of culture on pages of the textbook or other class materials. To illustrate how a combination of visual stimuli and thoughtful questions may facilitate deeper discussion: in the current textbook entitled We Can!, curry is associated with Thailand and churros with Spain (MEXT, 2017a, p. 48). This page presents clear-cut dichotomies between cultural products – and if unquestioned, this simplified juxtaposition may reinforce "my culture does this" and "your culture does that" stereotypes. In response, teachers may ask students questions such as, "Have you ever eaten curry or churros in Japan?," "Do you like those flavors?," or "What other foods do you eat at home which are not originally from Japan (such as pasta, bread, and gratin)?" Students may then reflect on the idea that practices do not have to be strictly associated with one country or culture, to the detriment of all others. In this way, students can begin to appreciate the ways that persons, products, practices and perspectives can cross national boundaries, and that such elements may in fact be embedded in their daily lives. Identity can then move beyond traditional identity markers such as family, name, and product consumption as a national citizen, and also become based on students' own choices of practices and perspectives across national boundaries (Borghetti, 2019).

For teachers seeking other empirically-supported resources for enriching discussions, one well-documented exercise is the Bafa Bafa cross-cultural simulation. By dividing students into two fictitious cultures, Alpha and Beta, this activity has led students to emotional epiphanies and increased cultural awareness (Sullivan & Duplaga, 1997). More recently, an interactive computer-based application called MIXER was developed in the UK to help students aged 9-11 develop self- and other-awareness, and manage intercultural conflict (Hall *et al.*, 2015). Another high-tech initiative is the SEE Learning program developed by Emory University, which aims to provide educators with knowledge and material to imbue their students with social awareness, compassion, and engagement ("SEE Learning," 2019).

Utilizing an English Notebook

As a way of supplementing classroom discussions, or as an alternative to discussions, an English Notebook would engage students' reflective thinking around cultural topics. One method of using an English Notebook is assigning reflective writing tasks to students on a weekly basis, which they would submit to the homeroom teacher the following week. In order to engage students' literacy skills across multiple languages—a concept referred to as "translanguaging" in linguistics research—it would be useful to encourage students to formulate ideas in Japanese first, or to creatively utilise words and phrases from different languages to express their current and emerging ideas (Leung & Valdés, 2019). This can be expected to help students consider cultural concepts, record their own impressions, and develop critical thinking skills including honesty, openness, insight, and awareness—thereby developing intercultural understanding as well (Phye, 1997).

There is precedent for the efficacy of written reflections in other Japanese contexts. At the university level, Suzuki (2012) found that when students wrote reflections on linguistic problems faced while learning English, they corrected their errors and mediated their linguistic development. In direct relation to culture, McConachy (2018) asked students to reflect upon cultural representation in their textbooks, which focused on exploring cultural issues among English language learners in Japan, and to articulate their stance in relation to those representations. Students were able to specify and deconstruct ethnocentric and stereotypical cultural representations, especially the Japanese representations. While some may question the feasibility of implementing reflective cultural activities at the Grade 5 and 6 level, there is good evidence to suggest that learners at this age are capable of abstract thinking and would benefit from the opportunity to build awareness of their position within and among cultures (Cothern, 1991; Okado, 1998).

Based on the literature, writing may include both free and structured responses, based on prompts such as:
- "How do you like [the culture(s) we studied today]?" (Sakai, 2014)
- "Do you want to visit [the country/countries we studied]? Why?" (Sakai, 2014)
- Which [cultural practice, food, etc.] would you want to try? Why?
- Why do you think [a cultural group] does [a cultural practice] in this way?
- What are the similarities between [a cultural greeting, school custom, cuisine, etc.] and your own?
- Does the textbook feature the same number of people who look Japanese and people who look non-Japanese? [or "boys and girls?" "children and adults?"] Why or why not?

These questions would encourage students to compare their own views with their experiences of culture, with the benefit of the extra reflection time provided by writing assignments. Teachers may wish to encourage students to compare written notes and even provide written or oral feedback to each other. This activity also provides an important opportunity for teachers to observe patterns in students' collective responses and to use interesting ideas that emerge in students' writing as a springboard for further classroom discussion or debate.

Promoting Local Engagement

When feasible, promoting interactions between students and non-Japanese members of the community is a stimulating way of fostering English language motivation, willingness to communicate, and positive attitudes towards diverse others. As documented in (Davidson & Liu, 2018), ten first-year

junior high students and four elementary school homeroom teachers in northern Japan were interviewed with the aim of gauging their identification with central concepts of global citizenship such as cultural awareness and open-mindedness. Nearly all interviewees attested that students enjoyed communicating with ALTs in English class, and with international volunteers at community festivals: rare occasions when students could freely connect with non-Japanese residents of their city. Students cited their experience of these resident foreigners as "kind," "interesting," and "funny" – from the Japanese adjectives yasashii and omoshiroi respectively – and felt that such multicultural exchanges and friendships were mutually beneficial (Davidson & Liu, 2018, p. 11). In this way, there is the potential for intercultural contact to be included within the EFL curriculum, especially if it involves simple ethnographic elements such as observing communicative situations and interviewing. One way to build up to this is to follow Sakai's (2014) suggestion of having students learn questioning techniques by individually or collaboratively building a questionnaire for an ALT, which could also be used to prompt semi-structured conversation with their ALT. This questionnaire could include inquiries such as:

- Why did you choose to move to Japan?
- What surprised you the most when you moved to Japan?
- What is your favorite part of [Japan/your home country/another country you have visited/another country we studied in class]?
- What do people in your home country value the most? How do you think these values differ from [Japan/another country you have visited/another country we have studied in class]?
- Is there anything you wish you could change about [your home culture/Japanese culture/another culture you have visited/another culture we have studied]?
- When you are in Japan, what do you miss the most about your home country? If/when you return to your home country, what will you miss about Japan?
- What is the most important thing you would like me to know about your country or the region where you grew up?

Whether during school hours or at local events, real-world interactions would also encourage students to proactively speak and listen to others, practicing the intercultural communication strategies which they learn about and reflect upon in the classroom. In particular, family-friendly international festivals offer prime opportunities for Japanese students to interact with volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds. In Tokyo, Yoyogi Park hosts festivals with food and entertainment from countries as diverse as Jamaica, Thailand and India; local communities may also invite ALTs and non-Japanese residents to showcase their home cultures at events such as the Ishikari World Festival (Ishikari International Association, n.d.; Wojnowski, 2015). While festivals may be criticized for portraying international products and persons as stereotypical and exotic, these events can also increase cultural value and encourage a diverse sense of place identity for the local community (George, 2015). Accordingly, students should be encouraged to explore the social spaces at these festivals, and talk to the volunteers using questions similar to those listed above for ALTs. Teachers may also assign reflection questions to follow the event, such as:

- Out of the national cultures you saw today, which was your favourite? Why?
- Out of the national cultures you saw today, which one surprised you the most? Why?
- How did you feel when you [tasted a new food/played a new game/tried on new clothing]?
- Do you think a cultural festival is the same as, or different from, visiting the country in person? Why?

- Do you want to visit any of the countries which were represented today? Why or why not?
- Do you think cultural festivals are a good way of learning about other cultures? Why or why not?
- What parts of other cultures did you learn about today (such as food, clothing, holidays, politics, personal opinions, and/or traditions)? Are there any more parts of those cultures that you did not see but wanted to know more about?

Such lines of inquiry not only help students to form more nuanced pictures of the cultures on display but also encourage them to critique cultural representations at the festivals themselves.

Conclusion

When mindfully implemented into the curriculum, authentic materials, classroom discussions, English Notebook assignments, and local engagement all have the potential to inform and develop students' intercultural communication skills and intercultural understanding. While this paper has focused on the Japanese context, I hope to underscore the more general point that, with more opportunities to make meaning from multimedia materials, discussions, and interactions, elementary school students can become more aware of different elements of culture; links between products, persons, practices and perspectives; and their own relationship to different cultures.

One pragmatic difficulty relevant to the Japanese context and beyond is that teachers often lack time to extend their lessons beyond the given curriculum, since they are tasked with many administrative and extracurricular obligations beyond classroom teaching (Ikeda *et al.*, 2019; OECD, 2014). However, some solutions may be adapted with little time and low financial cost, especially if ALTs – whose job entails promoting cultural exchange – are encouraged to cooperate in crafting informative and culturally-appropriate lesson plans. Furthermore, if the government were to incorporate these ideas into future published textbook activities, teachers would be better equipped to introduce global cultures and thinking into the classroom.

Secondly, it is important to note that cultural meanings constantly change and lack a universal end point. Therefore, when approaching culture within the EFL classroom, teachers must learn to adjust to the unpredictable (Scarino, 2008) – including cultural assumptions and biases which may prove tricky to navigate in the Japanese context, where the population is 98.1% ethnically Japanese (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019). In this society where sameness and conformity are valued, it may be difficult to accept difference, either superficial or intangible (Anderson & Wolfe, 2009; Yamagishi *et al.*, 2012). Teachers of both Japanese and foreign descent may also carry their own beliefs, biases, and insecurities surrounding the teaching of cultural awareness. For example, they may be reluctant to touch on deeper layers of culture such as values and politeness, which might be considered too "alien" or "sensitive" to speak on with authority (Savvidou & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2019, p. 53).

Holliday (2018b, p. 27) points out that some keys to relating perspectives across locations and cultures include the understandings that everyone can be modern and complex; personal feelings about how things "should be" are not necessarily sufficient; and the key is to engage and interact with difference, rather than simply understand difference. To make these mental leaps, Holliday (2018b, p. 45) suggests searching for "threads," or places of similarity which connect us, such as the ideas that we both have families and some form of education. This mental processing, as exemplified in the sample discussion and reflection questions above, would likely help students to move beyond the stereotypical barriers of "my culture does this" and "your culture does that" which tend to be reinforced by the simplified elementary school English curriculum. By engaging in this disciplined thinking – assisted by teacher-

led discussions, visual aids, and supplementary reading materials – students would open up to the complexity of culture and explore the "third space" between the known and the unknown, traveling across cultural boundaries and expectations of "self" and "other" to find new selves in new domains (Holliday, 2018a, p. 6). In future, research incorporating new ideas such as peace education and linguistic politeness theory (Ishihara, Orihashi, & Clark, 2019) may shed further light on how to address intercultural conflict in the classroom.

Moreover, teachers also need to remain conscious of the cultural backgrounds of their students – including students born and raised in the country at hand, foreign residents, and students on international exchange – as their upbringings may affect uptake of this cultural information (Li, 2016; Sulkowski & Deakin, 2009). Considering the parents' educational and cultural backgrounds, and even involving families in activities such as international festivals, might also inspire other ways for homeroom teachers to support development of well-rounded intercultural understanding (Trumbul *et al.*, 2000).

Ultimately, the development of intercultural understanding is a lifelong process. Just as "a teaching life is all about living in the questions" (Snowber, 2017, p. 1), both teachers and students will learn from continual, healthy dialogue surrounding culture and communication of cultural ideas. If all involved stay present and cognizant of their thoughts and assumptions, and remain curious to what lies outside their purview, there is unlimited potential to explore the wonderful products, persons, practices, and perspectives our world has to offer.

References

Anderson, F. E., & Wolfe, S. (2009). Under the interactional umbrella: Presentation and collaboration in Japanese classroom discourse. In R. Barnard & Torres-Guzmán (Eds.), *Creating classroom communities of learning: International case studies and perspectives (pp. 15-35)*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Bauer, E. B., & Guerrero, B. (2016). Young children's emerging identities as bilingual and biliterate students: The role of context. In A. Anderson, J. Anderson, J. Hare, & M. McTavish (Eds.), *Language, learning, and culture in early childhood: Home, school and community contexts (pp. 19-49)*. New York: Routledge.

Borghetti, C. (2019). Interculturality as collaborative identity management in language education. *Intercultural Communication Education, 2*(1). doi: 10.29140/ice.v2n1.101

Borghetti, C., & Beaven, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Study abroad and interculturality: Perspectives and discourses*. New York: Routledge.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Canale, G. (2016). (Re)searching culture in foreign language textbooks, or the politics of hide and seek. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 29*(2), 225-243. doi: 10.1080/07908318.2016.1144764

Central Intelligence Agency. (2019, May 9). *Japan — The World Factbook*. Retrieved May 12, 2019, from Central Intelligence Agency website: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ja.html

Cothern, N. B. (1991). *Seizing the power of personal journal writing*. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED340044

Davidson, R., & Liu, Y. (2018). Reaching the world outside: Cultural representation and perceptions of global citizenship in Japanese elementary school English textbooks. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 1-18. doi: 10.1080/07908318.2018.1560460

de Bruijn, A. (2017). From representation to participation: Rethinking the intercultural educational approach to folktales. *Children's Literature in Education*. doi: 10.1007/s10583-017-9330-x

Diaz, A. (2013). Intercultural understanding and professional learning through critical engagement. *Babel, 48*(1), 12-19. Retrieved May 18, 2019, from Literature Resource Center.

Diaz, A., & Moore, P. J. (2018). (Re)imagining a course in language and intercultural communication for the 21st century. *Intercultural Communication Education, 1*(3), 84-99. doi: 10.29140/ice.v1n3.87

George, J. (2015). Examining the cultural value of festivals. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management; Bingley, 6*(2), 122-134. doi: 10.1108/IJEFM-01-2015-0002

Hall, L., Tazzyman, S., Hume, C., Endrass, B., Lim, M.-Y., Hofstede, G., … Aylett, R. (2015). Learning to overcome cultural conflict through engaging with intelligent agents in synthetic cultures. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education: Official Journal of the International AIED Society, 25*(2), 291-317. doi: 10.1007/s40593-014-0031-y

Harris, B. (2019). *Battling boredom, part 1: 99 strategies to spark student engagement*. New York: Routledge.

Haven, K. F. (2007). *Story proof: The science behind the startling power of story*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Holliday, A. (2018a). Designing a course in intercultural education. *Intercultural Communication Education, 1*(1), 4-11. doi: 10.29140/ice.v1n1.24

Holliday, A. (2018b). *Understanding intercultural communication: Negotiating a grammar of culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Ikeda, M., Imai, H., & Takeuchi, O. (2019). An innovative approach to in-service teacher training for teaching English at Japanese public elementary schools. In H. Reinders, S. Ryan, & S. Nakamura (Eds.), *Innovation in language teaching and learning: The case of Japan (pp. 257-282)*. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-12567-7_13

Ishihara, N., Orihashi, T., & Clark, Z. (2019). Innovation in elementary classrooms: Integrating the teaching of English, history and peace linguistics. In H. Reinders, S. Ryan, & S. Nakamura (Eds.), *Innovation in language teaching and learning: The case of Japan (pp. 47-69)*. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-12567-7_4

Ishikari International Association. (n.d.). *World Festival*. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from 石狩国際交流協会 [Ishikari International Association] website: http://npoiia.jp/wf.html

Japan Times. (2018, December 15). *Japan set to spend ¥1.5 trillion on elementary and junior high school teachers in fiscal 2019. Japan Times*. Retrieved April 2, 2019, from https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/12/15/national/social-issues/japan-set-spend-%C2%A51-5-trillion-teachers-fiscal-2019/

Kearney, E. (2015*). Intercultural learning in modern language education, expanding meaning-making potentials*. doi: 10.21832/9781783094684

Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching, 44*(3), 354-367. doi: 10.1017/S0261444810000431

Leung, C., & Valdés, G. (2019). Translanguaging and the transdisciplinary framework for language teaching and learning in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal, 103*(2), 348-370. doi: /10.1111/modl.12568

Li, G. (2016). Social class, culture, and Asian children's home and school literacy connection: The case for cultural reciprocity in early literacy education. In A. Anderson, J. Anderson, J. Hare, & M. McTavish (Eds.), *Language, learning, and vulture in early childhood: Home, school and community contexts (pp. 103-122)*. New York: Routledge.

Liddicoat, A. J. (2007). Internationalising Japan: Nihonjinron and the intercultural in Japanese language-in-education policy. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 2*(1), 32-46. doi: 10.2167/md043.0

Liddicoat, A. J., & Scarino, A. (2013). *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

LinguaHouse.com. (2019). *Easter: ESL/EFL lesson plan and worksheet*. Retrieved May 8, 2019, from LinguaHouse website: https://www.linguahouse.com/esl--lesson--plans/general--english/easter

Low-Beer, A. (2001). Politics, school textbooks and cultural identity: The struggle in Bosnia and Hercegovina. *Internationale Schulbuchforschung, 23*(2), 215-223. Retrieved January 25, 2017, from http://www.jstor.org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/stable/43056447

McConachy, T. (2009). Raising sociocultural awareness through contextual analysis: Some tools for teachers. *ELT Journal, 63*(2), 116-125. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccn018

McConachy, T. (2018). Critically engaging with cultural representations in foreign language textbooks. *Intercultural Education, 29*(1), 77-88. doi: 10.1080/14675986.2017.1404783

Messekher, H. (2014). Cultural representations in Algerian English textbooks. In S. Garton & K. Graves (Eds.), *International perspectives on materials in ELT (pp. 69-86)*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

MEXT. (2010). *Chapter 4. Foreign language activities*. Retrieved July 6, 2017, from http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2010/10/20/1261037_12.pdf

MEXT. (2012). *Hi, friends! 1 (Vol. 1)*. Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki.

MEXT. (2017a). *We Can! 1 (Vol. 1)*. Tokyo: MEXT.

MEXT. (2017b). *We Can! 2 (Vol. 2)*. Tokyo: MEXT.

MEXT. (2017c). *教育における新学習指導要領の円滑娯施に向けた移行指直 [Transition towards the smooth implementation of the new course of study in foreign language education]*. Retrieved April 3, 2019, from http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/123/shiryo/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/06/28/1387431_11.pdf

MEXT. (2017d). *小学校外国語活動・外国語　研修ガイドブック [Elementary school foreign language activities/foreign language education training guidebook]*. Retrieved April 25, 2019, from Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan website: http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/123/houkoku/1382162.htm

MEXT. (2018). *新学習指導要領に対応した小学校外国語教育新教材について [Regarding new guidance materials for elementary foreign language education]*. Retrieved April 25, 2019, from Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan website: http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/123/houkoku/1382162.htm

Miura, A., & McGloin, N. H. (2008). *An integrated approach to intermediate Japanese*. Tokyo: Japan Times.

OECD. (2014). *The OECD teaching and learning international survey 2013*. Retrieved May 11, 2019, from http://www.oecd.org/education/school/talis-2013-results.htm

Okado, H. (1998). 「英語教育政策」と「異文化理解」に関する一考察 [Considering "English teaching policy" and "foreign culture understanding"]. *日本人と英語: 英語化する日本の学際的研究, 14*, 67-76.

Phye, G. D. (1997). *Handbook of academic learning: Construction of knowledge*. Retrieved May 8, 2019, from http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=6179083f-518a-4a8c-94cc-811010bcba17%40sdc-v-sessmgr01&vid=0&format=EB

Risager, K. (2018). *Representations of the world in language textbooks*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Ryan, S. (2009). Ambivalence and commitment, liberation and challenge: Investigating the attitudes of young Japanese people towards the learning of English. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 30*(5), 405-420. doi: 10.1080/01434630902928447

Sakai, H. (2014). 異文化理解の授業を行うにあたって [When conducting class for foreign culture understanding]. *Teaching English Now, 28*, 2-5. Retrieved June 20, 2019, from https://tb.sanseido-publ.co.jp/english/newcrown/t-e-n_bc/028.html

Sakamoto, R. (2014). Resolving the culture clash in the team-taught classroom. *Teaching English Now, 28*, 10-11. Retrieved June 20, 2019, from https://tb.sanseido-publ.co.jp/english/newcrown/t-e-n_bc/028.html

Savvidou, C., & Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2019). Teaching pragmatics: Nonnative-speaker teachers' knowledge, beliefs and reported practices. *Intercultural Communication Education, 2*(1). doi: 10.29140/ice.v2n1.124

Scarino, A. (2008). Reconceptualising learning programs for intercultural language learning. *Babel, 43*(1), 7-9. Retrieved April 2, 2019, from Literature Resource Center.

SEE Learning. (2019). Retrieved April 24, 2019, from SEE Learning website: https://seelearning.emory.edu/

Shardakova, M., & Pavlenko, A. (2004). Identity options in Russian textbooks. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 3*(1), 25-46. doi: 10.1207/s15327701jlie0301_2

Snowber, C. (2017). Living, loving, and dancing the questions. In S. Wiebe, E. Lyle, P. R. Wright, K. Dark, M. McLarnon, & L. Day (Eds.), *Ways of being in teaching: Conversations and reflections (pp. 1-5)*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Song, H. (2013). Deconstruction of cultural dominance in Korean EFL textbooks. *Intercultural Education, 24*(4), 382-390. doo: 10.1080/14675986.2013.809248

Sulkowski, N. B., & Deakin, M. K. (2009). Does understanding culture help enhance students' learning experience? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management; Bradford, 21*(2), 154-166. doi: 10.1108/09596110910935651

Sullivan, S. E., & Duplaga, E. A. (1997). The Bafa Bafa simulation: Faculty experiences and student reactions. *Journal of Management Education; Thousand Oaks, 21*(2), 265-272. Retrieved May 11, 2019, from http://ccl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/docview/195747313?accountid=10141

Suzuki, W. (2009). Written languaging, direct correction, and second language writing revision. *Language Learning, 62*(4), 1110-1133. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00720.x

Trumbul, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., & Greenfield, P. M. (2000). *Bridging cultures in our schools: New approaches that work: Knowledge brief*. Retrieved April 18, 2019, from https://www.wested.org/resources/bridging-cultures-in-our-schools-new-approaches-that-work-knowledge-brief/

Vraštilová, O. (2018). Supporting elementary students' reading through authentic literature for children. In A. Burns & J. Siegel (Eds.), *International perspectives on teaching the four skills in ELT: listening, speaking, reading, writing (pp. 141-152)*. Cham: Springer.

Warren, S. J., Wakefield, J. S., & Mills, L. A. (2013). Learning and teaching as communicative actions: Transmedia storytelling. In L.A. Wankel & P. Blessinger (Eds.), *Increasing student engagement and retention using multimedia technologies: Video annotation, multimedia applications, videoconferencing and transmedia storytelling*. Bingley: Emerald.

Witte, A. (2014). *Blending spaces: Mediating and assessing intercultural competence in the L2 classroom*. Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

Wojnowski, T. (2015, April 17). *International festivals at Yoyogi*. Retrieved May 9, 2019, from JapanTravel website: https://en.japantravel.com/tokyo/international-festivals-at-yoyogi/19929

Yamada, M. (2010). English as a multicultural language: Implications from a study of Japan's junior high schools' English language textbooks. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 31*(5), 491-506. doi: 10.1080/01434632.2010.502967

Yamagishi, T., Hashimoto, H., Cook, K. S., Kiyonari, T., Shinada, M., Mifune, N., … Li, Y. (2012). Modesty in self-presentation: A comparison between the USA and Japan. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 15*(1), 60-68. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-839X.2011.01362.x

Yuen, K.-M. (2011). The representation of foreign cultures in English textbooks. *ELT Journal, 65*(4), 458-466. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccq089

Author biodata

Rachel Davidson has studied and taught in Canada, the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom. After teaching elementary English on the JET Programme, she continued to pursue her interdisciplinary research interests at the University of Cambridge and graduated in 2017 with a MPhil in Research in Second Language Education. She currently lives and works in Vancouver, Canada, where she helps her students gain acceptance to prestigious American, British, and Canadian universities. She is proficient in English and Japanese.

Acknowledgements