

# Teaching Intermediate to Advanced Japanese Language Courses Incorporating Cultural Materials: A Data Analysis

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## Abstract

The United States Air Force Academy strives to teach Japanese language and culture through media that students enjoy, such as anime, TV shows, and music videos, while helping them acquire Japanese as a tool for understanding these cultural products (works, programs, and songs). This study aimed to determine if and how much this teaching method could increase students' Japanese language skills. We analyzed the proficiency test results and tracked changes for five years among a group of intermediate to advanced students. Findings indicate that since the deliberate introduction of the new teaching approach, there has been a clear overall improvement in the group's language abilities. Enrollment also increased. Although there were slight declines in some years, a closer look at the student makeup suggests that these were not necessarily negative outcomes. Moreover, the student survey responses generally reflected a positive evaluation of the use of culturally enriched teaching methods. Culturally integrated pedagogy offers a transferable model for sustaining engagement and deepening understanding throughout diverse higher-education contexts.

**Keywords:** *Japanese language teaching, Japanese instruction in university level education, language proficiency, Japanese popular culture*

## Introduction and Context

The context of the study is both a military service academy and a four-year university accredited as a higher education institution. Upon graduation, students, except international cadets, are commissioned into the U.S. Air Force or the Space Force. However, a number of them also go on to pursue graduate studies at civilian universities around the world, primarily in the United States, after receiving prestigious scholarships such as the Fulbright, Marshall, or Truman. In recent years, graduates of the Japanese minor program have gone on to institutions such

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as Harvard, Columbia, Georgetown, Stanford, and the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa to earn master’s degrees.

At a more detailed level, the program avoids using materials that could raise sensitive issues, such as gender or sexual violence, within the bounds of common sense. As a result, showing Japanese pop culture works in class rarely provokes ideological backlash or criticism of the course. Furthermore, many recent Japanese anime works, such as those by Hayao Miyazaki and Hideaki Anno, are created by artists who are openly self-described “military otaku” (individuals who have a deep fascination with military-related topics) and are quite popular. This makes them particularly engaging for students who are undergoing military training and studying strategy.

In short, the program emphasizes learners’ agency. The instructors believe that unless students take an active interest in the Japanese language and culture, advanced proficiency is unlikely to occur. As Lee and VanPatten (2003) put it, foreign languages are “ultimately unteachable” (p. 23), and instructors may only be able to provide opportunities for students to learn. Of course, they also remind us that “[t]hese opportunities must be informed by what we know about [linguistic] acquisition” (p. 23).

Inquiries into culture-integrated pedagogy have also emerged in other language fields, particularly in studies of French language instruction. Research on French cinema and other audio-visual materials—such as Pegrum (2008) and Boltova (1999)—shows that these resources can significantly enhance learner engagement and motivation. While informed by this work, the present study draws on a broader array of cultural materials and aligns with the methodological shift from communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence (ICC). As Nadera (2012) notes, the communicative approach that gained prominence in the 1990s aimed to develop grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), based on the premise that language functions primarily as a tool for communication among speakers. Today, however, the field increasingly recognizes that meaningful communication is inseparable from the cultural frameworks that shape both linguistic expression and interpretation.

Michael Byram and subsequent scholars emphasize that foreign language education should therefore cultivate intercultural communicators—individuals able to interact ethically and effectively across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997, 2020). This marks a significant evolution from earlier paradigms: several decades ago, the primary goal of language instruction was to enable students to read literature, considered the pinnacle of linguistic artistry (Brooks, 1968). By the turn of the century, communication became the central focus, and in the early 21st century, cultural understanding emerged as fundamental to communicative practice itself.

The “otherness” inherent in the target culture—often most visible from the learner’s perspective—can be accessed through the cultural materials used in Japanese language classrooms. When literary texts and other cultural artifacts exemplify a meaningful cultural context, whether aesthetically or pragmatically, they become powerful resources for authentic communication and interpretation, particularly in advanced language courses.

In addition to Fukunaga’s (2006) findings, we have frequently observed—especially during oral interviews and casual conversations both inside and outside the classroom—that many students enroll in Japanese courses because they are drawn to Japanese cultural artifacts, particularly anime produced by Studio Ghibli, which many of them have grown up watching since childhood. By using materials that they enjoy in the classroom, as long as they are acceptable for educational purposes, instructors can expect students to be more motivated to advance

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their learning. Furuahara-Turner (2013) stated, “By using materials in which students are already interested, language teachers can expect that students will enhance and improve their language competencies” (p. 73). Watching and studying cultural materials together in class has the potential to nurture communal feelings among students, contributing to their long-term commitment to studying the language. Additionally, instructors can provide authentic contexts for their teaching by demonstrating how the target language is used in real cultural spheres, which may be the most important aspect of teaching from the students’ perspective. In recent years, efforts have been made at some North American universities, such as the University of Chicago, the University of Washington (Seattle), and the University of Hawai‘i, to offer intermediate and advanced Japanese courses that incorporate viewing of Studio Ghibli films and similar media as part of language learning, as evidenced in the schools’ course offerings and departmental websites.

In the 2000s, there was a growing interest in theories of Japanese culture and its people, which led to efforts to promote traditional Japanese values to the world through Japanese language education, as critically discussed by Matsumoto and Okamoto (2003) and Kubota (2003). However, insofar as such efforts are aimed at ideological indoctrination of students, the instructors are not currently interested in this approach. Their position is to teach Japanese as a tool to help students gain a deeper understanding of things in which they are already interested. For example, the instructors teach honorifics, polite expressions, and humble language in the classroom—not to instill norms of social hierarchy but because these forms are used not only in everyday conversation but also in creative works such as anime, films, and novels. Understanding them allows students to enjoy and comprehend these works more fully. Of course, if mastering honorifics and polite/humble expressions also helps students communicate more effectively with Japanese speakers, that is certainly a welcome outcome—and one that the instructors do expect to some extent—but this is not the primary goal.

As noted above, the program at this Academy highlights the positive dimensions of its teaching materials while remaining open to difficult discussions when appropriate, thereby fostering a safe and healthy learning community. For example, if a film includes a scene in which a relationship begins with mutual consent, we may later revisit that moment and—using some English if necessary—draw students’ attention to the courteous steps through which affection is expressed. If any students react strongly to the male protagonist’s treatment of a young girl, we provide broader contextual information and explain the scene’s meaning and significance within the work as a whole. This kind of careful guidance proves especially valuable when students prepare subsequent oral presentations and writing assignments. The program also provides worksheets with detailed comprehension questions before screening audiovisual materials to help students more fully appreciate the work and avoid misunderstanding of important backgrounds and contents. The movies screened in class provide topics and materials for students to discuss cultural issues in writing and oral presentation assignments. The program also uses the lyrics of popular songs when introducing new vocabulary and grammar items. After discussing the gist of the lyrics, instructors typically sing the songs at the beginning of the class. If it is entertaining for students, inspiring them to think and making them more engaged in learning the target language, to what extent is it effective in advancing their learning? Evidence must be provided that such instruction, which incorporates cultural materials, is indeed effective, justifying the program’s efforts in a visible, measurable, and quantitative manner.

## **Intervention**

In the above mentioned contexts, we intentionally increased the number of cultural materials and organized them into the target linguistic content. For example, we used popular song lyrics to introduce new grammar items, and screened movies to provide topics for written assignments and oral proficiency assessments, especially in upper-level Japanese courses (comprehension check worksheets were provided). This was implemented in the Japanese 321, 322, and 365 sequence during the academic year 2022-2023. At the Academy, freshmen start Japanese with courses 131 and 132. To minor in Japanese, students typically take 221-222 in their second year, 321-322 in their third year, and 365 in their fourth year. Advanced 400-level courses are available after completion of minor requirements.

## **Hypotheses**

The study proposed three hypotheses:

1. 1A. Students' Japanese language proficiency test scores will improve, especially when more cultural materials are used in classroom instruction.  
1B. Cultural materials will help increase students' listening test scores more than their reading scores.
2. Course enrollments will increase after the introduction of cultural materials in the courses.
3. Explanatory: What do students think of culture-incorporated teaching? If they like it, their exam scores will improve compared to those who do not.

## **Methodology**

The Department of Languages and Cultures (formerly the Department of Foreign Languages when the present study was initiated) at the United States Air Force Academy administered Brigham Young University (BYU) Language Proficiency Tests to participants in eight languages starting in the academic year 2021-2022. This study used score data from Japanese 322 and 365 over the past several years, comparing changes over the past couple of years. The online proficiency test includes two components: listening and reading.

Unlike the adaptive format of Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish tests, where test takers see questions of appropriate difficulty based on their previous responses, Japanese test-takers must answer every question in a prepared sequence. While there are technical issues regarding how fairly and faithfully the test assesses students' linguistic competence, the authors assumed that the test results would reflect the real situations of students' learning and abilities. We also counted the number of participants in each course of the Japanese 321, 322, and 365 sequence during the academic years 2020 through 2025 to study any relationship between the BYU test score averages and changes in enrollment numbers.

Swanson and LeLoup (2020) analyzed language proficiency test data from first-year college Spanish students and concluded that the participants successfully achieved the proficiency levels outlined in the language department's foreign language education roadmap. Following their methodology, which incorporates the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Proficiency Scale, the authors assigned numerical values to each level as follows: Novice-Low = 1.0, Novice-Mid = 2.0, Novice-High = 3.0, Intermediate-Low = 4.0, Intermediate-Mid = 5.0, Intermediate-High = 6.0, Advanced-Low = 7.0, Advanced-Mid = 8.0, Advanced-High = 9.0, and Superior = 10.0. Both studies used language proficiency test scores collected from cadets at the United States Air Force Academy.

**Results**

We analyzed the actual data that came out. These tables share the results and show trends in various areas and across time.

**Enrollment**

Enrollment data are shared in the first table. As shown in Table A, in recent years, since cultural materials have been organically incorporated into the lessons in the academic year 2022-2023, the number of students wishing to take Japanese has increased. The number of freshmen taking Japanese (131-132) has been growing annually.

**Table A**

*Enrollment Data*

	131	132	221	222	321	322	365
<b>2020-2021</b>	87	68	33	28	24	23	15
<b>2021-2022</b>	84	77	39	24	24	26	20
<b>2022-2023</b>	98	97	45	43	29	29	24
<b>2023-2024</b>	96	92	45	40	39	36	26
<b>2024-2025</b>	110	106	54	44	36	38	36

*Note. Data collected by the authors as part of the 2025 survey study.*

As the foreign language requirement ends after the first year at the United States Air Force Academy, in recent years, approximately 50% of students have continued from Japanese 132 to 221. However, beyond 221, the retention rate of students enrolled in Japanese also increased from 2022. The exception was a noticeable number of students who dropped out between 221 and 222, largely because they were excluded from the selection process for the short-term study-abroad program—typically because their GPA or physical education grades did not meet the required standards— which in turn may have contributed toward a loss of motivation. Most students completed the Japanese minor by 365, whereas in the previous five years, enrollment has more than doubled, with the number of sections expanding from one to two.

**Trends in Average Scores of the BYU Test**

As explained above, the BYU test consists of two sections that assess listening and reading competence, each lasting approximately one hour. The test is conducted on a computer; however, for Japanese (and Portuguese), an adaptive format has not yet been adopted. In other words, the test does not present more difficult questions if the examinee answers them correctly; instead, the examinee answers all the prepared questions. If the questions are too difficult, the examinee can choose “I don’t know” from the multiple-choice answers and move on to the next question (though this will lower their score). In the Listening section, the audio material itself has a time limit, whereas in the Reading section, each question has a time limit for reading and answering.

The Reading section questions are presented in a mix of kanji and kana, which are characteristic of the Japanese language; however, difficult kanji do not have furigana (phonetic guides), which often leads to student complaints. This is because the beginner textbooks they use up to level 365 (*Minna no Nihongo*, Volume 2) generally include furigana for kanji. However, if everything was written in hiragana, it would make it harder to grasp its meaning.

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The raw data for the test years are presented in Tables B and C. Table B presents the *p*-values of the standard deviation of each average score.

**Table B**

*Score Averages (Standard Deviation)*

	322/Spring		365/Fall	
	Listening	Reading	Listening	Reading
<b>2021</b>			3.7 (1.4)	3.3 (1.5)
<b>2022</b>	4.0 (1.6)	2.5 (1.0)	3.8 (1.6)	3.0 (1.1)
<b>2023</b>	4.7 (2.8)	3.5 (1.9)	3.9 (1.4)	3.5 (1.7)
<b>2024</b>	3.4 (1.3)	2.8 (0.8)	3.8 (1.3)	2.8 (0.9)

*Note. Data collected by the authors as part of the 2025 survey study.*

**Table C**

*Number of Test Takers*

	322		365	
	Listening	Reading	Listening	Reading
<b>2021</b>			6	6
<b>2022</b>	10	10	22	22
<b>2023</b>	15	15	26	26
<b>2024</b>	36	36	36	36

*Note. Data collected by the authors as part of the 2025 survey study.*

**Table D**

*JPN322 from 2022 to 2023*

	Listening	Reading
<b>2022</b>	(1.6)	2.5 (1.0)
<b>2023</b>	4.7 (2.8)	3.5 (1.9)

*Note. Data collected by the authors as part of the 2025 survey study.*

**Table E**

*JPN365 from 2022 to 2023*

	Listening	Reading
<b>2022</b>	3.8 (1.6)	3.0 (1.1)
<b>2023</b>	3.9 (1.4)	3.5 (1.7)

*Note. Data collected by the authors as part of the 2025 survey study.*

1) Changes in JPN322 from 2022 to 2023: The events in Japanese 322 from 2022 to 2023, during which there was an intervention, supported Hypothesis 1A. The number of test takers increased (because test takers were randomly chosen in 2022 but the test became mandatory in 2023), and the standard deviation also increased. See Table D. However, average scores for both listening and reading improved. Listening scores increased from 4 to 4.7, and reading scores increased from 2.5 to 3.5. As predicted by hypothesis 1B, listening scores were higher although growth was greater in reading.

2) in JPN365 from 2022 to 2023: Similarly, the average scores for Japanese 365 also increased before and after the intervention year (2022-2023). See Table E. Regarding listening, the standard deviation decreased, indicating that the variation around the mean reduced. For reading, the variation increased, although the mean also showed an increase of 0.5, supporting Hypothesis 1A, similar to that for listening.

3) Change in the BYU test algorithm in the summer of 2023: While analyzing the student data, we noticed something peculiar. Students who recorded a “Sup-

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rior” result in the spring of 2023 saw their scores significantly drop when they retook the BYU test in the fall. When we showed the data and asked questions in the fall of 2024, Dr. Matthew Wilcox, who oversees language proficiency assessment at BYU, explained that the algorithm for the Japanese test was changed between spring and fall, making it impossible to achieve a “Superior” result in both listening and reading. Therefore, comparing the average scores before and after the spring semester of 2023 would be meaningless. For example, in both 322 and 365, the average scores dropped after the summer of 2023, largely owing to the change in the BYU test algorithm.

4) Change from JPN322 in Spring 2024 to JPN365 in Fall 2024: Following the algorithm change in the Japanese BYU test, the average scores increased from JPN322 in Spring 2024 to JPN365 in Fall 2024. See Table F. Although the number of test-takers remained the same (36), the composition of the two student groups differed between 322 and 365. Two of the top students from JPN322 in Spring 2024 participated in semester exchanges in Japan and Australia and did not take JPN365 in Fall 2024. Additionally, three high-achieving students attended the summer intensive immersion course (CSLIP) in the previous summer and either fulfilled their minor requirements with JPN322 or graduated; therefore, they did not take JPN365. Another student could not take JPN365 due to a scheduling conflict. Conversely, six “heritage” speakers, who were either born into Japanese-speaking households or spent several years in Japan before joining the Academy, enrolled in JPN365 in Fall 2024. These six students joined either as freshmen or as returnees who spent two years outside the Academy as missionaries.

**Table F:**

*JPN322 in Spring 2024 and JPN365 in Fall 2024*

	322		365	
	Listening	Reading	Listening	Reading
2024	3.4 (1.3)	2.8 (0.8)	3.8 (1.3)	2.8 (0.9)

*Note. Data collected by the authors as part of the 2025 survey study.*

What impact did the six students from Japanese 322 who did not take 365 in the fall semester, and the six new students who joined 365 as freshmen in the fall, have on the average scores of their respective groups? As shown in Table F, when we compare the average scores of each group, we observe a 0.4-point increase in listening, whereas reading scores remained the same. Looking more closely at the six students in each group, as shown in the upper half of Table G following, the average listening score for the 322 group was 3.8, while that of the 365 group averaged 5.3, a 1.5-point increase. However, for reading, the 322 group averaged 3.2, and the 365 group 3.3, showing only a slight 0.1-point increase. In other words, for the 30 students who continued their studies from 322 to 365, their Japanese proficiency appeared to have been largely maintained, rather than significantly improved. Although both semesters occurred after the shift to culture-based teaching materials and followed our instructional intervention, the results were somewhat disappointing. Even if the impact of culture-based instruction is gradual and may require a longer period to manifest in measurable language proficiency, it is still concerning that students who studied for nearly a full year, including the summer break, showed no clear overall improvement. One might speculate how the results would have differed had the six students who completed the Japanese minor in 322 or studied abroad in the fall continued into 365, or if the six heritage speakers who joined 365 had not enrolled. However, such counterfactual scenarios offer little practical insight. More importantly,

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since completing this study, the instructors have continued to refine courses that integrate cultural elements, steadily improving educational outcomes by enhancing both materials and teaching methods. These developments suggest that the effectiveness of instruction combining language and culture depends heavily on careful consideration of how such elements are both selected and implemented.

**Table G**

*Students in and out in JPN322 and JPN365*

<b>JPN322 Spring 2024</b>				
	<b>Listening</b>		<b>Reading</b>	
<b>Cadet C</b>	Novice High	3	Intermediate Low	4
<b>Cadet D</b>	Novice High	3	Novice Mid	2
<b>Cadet E</b>	Intermediate Low	4	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet F</b>	Intermediate High	6	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet G</b>	Intermediate Low	4	Intermediate Low	4
<b>Cadet H</b>	Novice High	3	Novice High	3
	Average (SD)	3.8 (1.1)		3.2 (0.7)
<b>JPN365 Fall 2024</b>				
	<b>Listening</b>		<b>Reading</b>	
<b>Cadet I</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Intermediate Low	4
<b>Cadet J</b>	Intermediate High	6	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet K</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Intermediate Low	4
<b>Cadet L</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet M</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Novice Mid	2
<b>Cadet N</b>	Intermediate High	6	Intermediate Low	4
	Average (SD)	5.3 (0.5)		3.3 (0.7)
<b>JPN365 Fall 2023</b>				
	<b>Listening</b>		<b>Reading</b>	
<b>Cadet O</b>	Intermediate High	6	Intermediate High	6
<b>Cadet P</b>	Advanced Low	7	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet Q</b>	Advanced Mid	8	Intermediate High	6
<b>Cadet R</b>	Novice High	3	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet S</b>	Advanced Mid		Advanced High	9
<b>Cadet T</b>	Advanced Low	7	Intermediate High	6
<b>Cadet U</b>	Novice High	3	Novice High	3
	Average (SD)	6.0 (2.0)		5.1 (2.1)
<b>JPN365 Fall 2024</b>				
	<b>Listening</b>		<b>Reading</b>	
<b>Cadet I</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Intermediate Low	4
<b>Cadet J</b>	Intermediate High	6	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet K</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Intermediate Low	4
<b>Cadet L</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Novice High	3
<b>Cadet M</b>	Intermediate Mid	5	Novice Mid	2
<b>Cadet N</b>	Intermediate High	6	Intermediate Low	4
	Average (SD)	5.3 (0.5)		3.3 (0.7)

*Note. Data collected by the authors as part of the 2025 survey study.*

Change in JPN365 from 2023 to 2024: Since this period also follows the interventions, we believe that this does not negate the effectiveness of our cultural teaching, even though the average has slightly decreased. We examined the content and found that there were seven “heritage” speakers in JPN365 in 2023 and six in 2024. See the charts on the lower half of Table G. It seems that the higher number of high-scoring heritage speakers in 2023 (7 “heritage” among 26 students) compared to 2024 (6 “heritage” among 36 students) influenced the higher average scores in 2023.

### **Student Enthusiasm as Reflected in Survey Responses**

Since we began intentionally incorporating cultural materials into our classes, we have conducted surveys asking students to voluntarily share their

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opinions. The surveys were not anonymous and we made it clear that responses would not affect their grades, resulting in a response rate of 48%. In surveys conducted in Japanese 365 during the Fall 2023 semester, and in Japanese 222 and 322 during the Spring 2024 semester, we received responses from 21 out of 26 students in 365, 16 out of 40 in 222, and 12 out of 36 in 322. The survey consisted of 12 multiple-choice questions rated on a four-point scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree), along with 3 open-ended questions. The responses to the first 12 questions are summarized in Table H.

**Table H**

### *Multiple-Choice Survey Results*

1. Each statement below refers to <b>listening to pop music</b> during class. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	% of Strongly Agree & Agree	
a I enjoyed listening to Japanese pop music during the lessons.	25	17	5	1	87.5	
b Writing about the connection between the pop music and what we were learning in class increased my learning of the Japanese	7	26	11	4	68.8	
c Listening to Japanese pop music in class motivated me to listen to Japanese pop music outside of class.	25	16	5	2	85.4	
d Listening to Japanese pop music in class helped me to better understand Japanese culture.	14	22	11	1	75	
2. Each statement below refers to <b>watching Japanese TV shows</b> during class. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	No answer	
a I enjoyed watching Japanese TV shows during the lessons.	27	17	4	0		91.7
b Writing about the connection between the TV shows and what we were learning in class increased my learning of the Japanese	16	18	12	2		70.8
c Watching Japanese TV shows in class motivated me to listen to Japanese pop music outside of class.	17	20	9	2		77.1
d Watching Japanese TV shows in class helped me to better understand Japanese culture.	20	22	4	1	1	91.7
3. Each statement below refers to <b>watching Japanese movies</b> during class. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree		
a I enjoyed watching Japanese movies during the lessons.	32	14	1	1		95.8
b Writing about the connection between the movies and what we were learning in class increased my learning of the Japanese language.	18	19	10	1		77.1
c Watching Japanese movies in class motivated me to listen to Japanese pop music outside of class.	20	20	6	2		83.3
d Watching Japanese movies in class helped me to better understand Japanese culture.	19	27	2	0		95.8

From the data, three key points emerge:

1. Among the students who responded, roughly half expressed positive views on the effectiveness of using cultural materials in class.
2. While 88% of the students enjoyed listening to pop music in class, TV programs were even more popular (92%), and full-length films were the most favored (96%).
3. In terms of cultural understanding, students found pop music (75%), TV programs (92%), and full-length films (96%) effective.

The responses also provided insight into the types of materials used in class beyond the textbooks (*Minna no Nihongo*, Volumes I & II, and *Pop Culture New & Old*). After instructional intervention, the 321–322–365 course sequence included the following materials:

- Pop music: Songs such as Kyu Sakamoto’s “Ue o Muite Arukō (Sukiyaki),” Happy End’s “Kaze o Atsumete (Gathering the Wind),” Yumi Arai’s “Rouge no Dengen (The Lipstick Note),” Eiichi Ohtaki’s “Velvet Motel,” Tatsuro Yamashita’s “Christmas Eve,” Miki Matsubara’s

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“Mayonaka no Door (Stay With Me),” Sayuri Ishikawa’s “Homerareta (Praise Received),” YOASOBI’s “Gunjou (Blue),” and Gen Hoshino’s “Souzou (Create),” among many others.

- TV programs: Educational shows from NHK’s E-Tele such as *PythagoraSwitch*, *Design Ah*, and *NHK Academia* featuring Joe Hisaishi.
- Full-length films: *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, *Miss Hokusai*, *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World*, *No Smoking* (a documentary featuring Haruomi Hosono), and *CODA* (a documentary featuring Ryuichi Sakamoto).

For pop songs, we not only explained the lyrics after viewing, but also had students sing parts of the songs together (as much as possible, even if they were not professional singers). YouTube and NHK music programs were used as video clips whenever available, as they conveniently displayed lyrics on the screen. For TV programs and films, we distributed detailed worksheets with questions in both English and Japanese, and incorporated them into writing assignments.

Finally, we categorized the students’ responses to the three open-ended questions by theme. The results are summarized in Table I (next page). Some responses touched on more than one theme; however, we assessed the primary focus of each theme and counted it under only one category. The total number of responses for each item was 48.

What emerges from these comments is the structural nature of the classes, centered on student agency, the classroom environment, and the use of cultural materials. However, it is somewhat unsettling to consider that about half of the students left no comments.

Looking back, even the choice of materials raises important questions. To accommodate students’ language proficiency, instructors often rely on Japanese educational programs designed for children, which invites debate about whether this practice overlooks the intellectual maturity of undergraduate learners. However, works such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Castle in the Sky*, and *Doraemon: Nobita and the Steel Troops* offer multilayered narratives that can be appreciated by both adults and children, enabling varied levels of interpretation.

Moreover, students’ compositions show that they recognize the enjoyment adult creators take in producing their works, even when the target audience is young children. In other words, students can adopt not only the perspective of child viewers but also that of the creators who craft and edit their programs and movies to appeal to audiences of all ages. This awareness both surprises and encourages the instructors, highlighting the significant potential of culturally integrated instructional approaches.

Recognizing a phrase just learned from the textbook in a film’s dialogue is an irreplaceable experience. One student commented, “I enjoy walking into class with a Japanese song playing and film sessions are consistently engaging.” Another wrote, “[Japanese pop music] increased my motivation to attend class and [I] listened to some songs out of class.” The authors are convinced that our classes should aim to respond to voices like these, while also enhancing students’ language proficiency.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that integrating cultural materials into intermediate and advanced Japanese language courses can enhance student engagement and support sustained language development. Although measurable proficiency gains

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**Table I**

### *Text Responses*

Question 4: Please describe how using popular Japanese materials either contributed or did not contribute to your learning of the Japanese language.	
<b>Q4 Themes</b>	<b># of Response</b>
Audio-visual materials such as TV shows and movies supported my Japanese learning by being <u>engaging, enjoyable, and rich in content.</u>	13
Cultural materials inspired me to learn Japanese in a way that traditional methods could not.	11
Cultural materials exposed me to both formal and informal speech at natural speeds, which <u>significantly deepened my understanding of the Japanese language.</u>	10
Cultural materials contributed to my Japanese language learning, particularly in areas like <u>vocabulary and grammar.</u>	5
Although cultural materials did not directly contribute to my Japanese language learning, they more <u>or less enhanced my understanding of Japanese culture through exposure.</u>	4
Music helped me learn Japanese by motivating me to understand the meaning behind the lyrics.	3
No answer	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>

  

Question 5: Please describe how using popular Japanese materials either contributed or did not contribute to your motivation or engagement in this class.	
<b>Q5 Themes</b>	<b># of Response</b>
Cultural materials like music, movies, and pop culture significantly increased my motivation to learn Japanese.	18
I found the materials engaging, which made classes more enjoyable and helped maintain my interest.	17
I note that exposure to real-life language use (e.g., conversations, sentence structures) helped me apply what I have learned in practical contexts.	5
Cultural materials deepened my appreciation and understanding of Japanese culture.	3
I'm not sure how effective they were for me, as I struggled with the speed of native media and <u>often needed additional support like subtitles.</u>	2
No answer	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>

  

Question 6: Which specific class materials do you think contributed most to your learning and understanding Japanese language and culture? Please feel free to explain your selection(s).	
<b>Q6 Themes</b>	<b># of Response</b>
Movies and Documentaries: I learned Japanese especially by watching and analyzing Japanese films and documentaries.	13
Pop Culture Materials: I learned Japanese especially through the Japanese educational TV programs and materials directly tied to Japanese life.	10
Music and Songs: I learned Japanese especially by J-Pop, lyrics analysis, listening/singing, and <u>music-related cultural insights.</u>	9
Writing Assignments and Essays: I learned Japanese especially by writing about movies, music, or <u>cultural topics.</u>	6
Teacher and Class Support: I learned Japanese primarily with the instructor's guidance and <u>class members' support.</u>	4
Class Discussions and Presentations: I learned Japanese especially through in-class discussions, <u>slide shows, and presentations.</u>	2
No Answer	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>

may emerge only gradually, culturally rich content helps maintain student interest and deepens comprehension. Survey responses and assessment data further indicate that students respond positively to materials that align with their interests and cognitive maturity. Continued research should therefore explore the long-term effects of cultural immersion on language learning and refine pedagogical strategies that balance linguistic rigor with cultural relevance.

At a broader level, learning the language and culture of another society cultivates the empathy and perspective-taking essential for engaging with individuals who do not share one's historical or cultural background. Such benefits may unfold slowly, but they meaningfully shape students' intellectual development. The joy of teaching lies precisely in offering learners the materials and guidance that support this growth.

Looking ahead, the challenge is to integrate reading materials more effectively with activities such as karaoke, anime viewing, film analysis, and popular music, and to scaffold these experiences through worksheets, guided interpretation, and critical reflection. Achieving a balanced integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing requires deliberate planning and thoughtful classroom implementation. The authors have sought to provide tailored instructional support that enables students to progress toward course-level proficiency targets, despite the persistent constraints of limited instructional time. Emerging tools—such as the pedagogically informed use of AI—may help address some of these constraints.

The authors plan to continue refining culturally integrated instruction by seeking improved materials, enhancing delivery methods, and evaluating its impact through regular aptitude testing and student surveys. More broadly, as part of their commitment to higher education's intellectual and educational mission, they hope that this work will contribute to pedagogical innovation across disciplines. When carefully scaffolded and aligned with students' cognitive maturity, culturally integrated pedagogy offers a transferable model for sustaining engagement and deepening understanding throughout diverse higher-education contexts.

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