

From Fragmentation to Coherence: Learner Perspectives on Textbook Design for Japanese Traditional Culture in Vietnamese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: Cultural content in foreign language programs is often plentiful, yet it does not readily organize itself into forms that support interpretation. This study explores how such fragmentation is experienced within a Japanese Traditional Culture course at Hanoi University, and what these reveals for the design of course materials. Rather than assessing existing materials, it approaches the issue through needs analysis, focusing on how advanced learners themselves construe the place of cultural knowledge within their academic and emerging professional orientations. Data were gathered from 64 third- and fourth-year students via a questionnaire combining closed and open-ended items. Descriptive analysis was used to trace response patterns, while qualitative data were examined inductively to capture how learners position themselves in relation to cultural content. The findings do not point to a lack of materials, but to a problem of coherence—one that gives rise to a clear demand for a course-specific textbook. What students seem to be seeking are forms of knowledge that hold together: structured rather than dispersed, conceptually grounded rather than loosely assembled, and connected to everyday practices rather than detached from them. In this context, terminology support, visual organization, and cross-cultural comparison are not supplementary features, but part of the conditions that allow cultural content to be made sense of. What emerges is less a problem of quantity than of arrangement. Materials become effective to the extent that they sustain coherence, make conceptual relations visible, and enable interpretive engagement. Structure, in this sense, is not incidental but constitutive of how cultural knowledge can be understood, particularly where engagement with the target culture remains indirect.

KEYWORDS: materials development; textbook design; intercultural learning; needs analysis; Japanese culture; higher education

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, in an advanced Japanese language class at Hanoi University, a student posed a question that, while seemingly straightforward, unsettled the direction of the discussion: “If we can read about Noh theatre in academic books, why does it still feel difficult to truly understand it?” The class had just engaged with a translated academic text—one that posed little linguistic difficulty and presented its arguments with considerable conceptual clarity. Yet the ensuing discussion revealed a different kind of difficulty. Students were not struggling with terminology or historical detail; rather, they found it challenging to situate what they had learned within a broader interpretive framework.

This observation points beyond the confines of a single classroom. The issue is not access to information, but the ways in which cultural knowledge is organized and mediated. When culture is encountered as a succession of discrete topics, understanding remains partial—even where information itself is abundant.

Within skill-oriented language teaching, culture typically appears in a supporting role, folded into tasks that serve linguistic aims: a seasonal festival frames new vocabulary; a short text on gift-giving supplies pragmatic cues. The organizing logic remains the development of language proficiency. A different orientation can be observed in a course such as Japanese Traditional Culture in the Department of Japanese Studies at Hanoi University, where the usual hierarchy between language and culture no longer holds. Culture is not treated as ancillary to linguistic aims, but as the central domain of inquiry in its own right. Engagement, in this context, requires students to move across religious ideas, aesthetic frameworks, artistic practices, and patterns of everyday life—not as separate units of content, but as mutually constitutive fields through which meaning takes shape and becomes interpretable. What is at stake here reflects a wider reconfiguration in how intercultural communicative competence is understood. The emphasis no longer rests on the accumulation of cultural facts, but on the capacity to interpret and negotiate meaning across different cultural systems (Byram, 2020).

By the point at which students enter this course, they have typically already undergone several years of intensive language training and are working at upper-intermediate to advanced levels. Many are moving toward professional pathways in teaching, translation, or intercultural mediation. Cultural knowledge, in this context, is not supplementary. It becomes something to be worked through—interpreted, articulated, and applied.

Within Vietnamese higher education, where curriculum design is shaped by national policy frameworks (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2012), the organization of such knowledge carries institutional as well as pedagogical implications. Yet the presence of

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a culture course does not in itself resolve how that knowledge should be structured. At Hanoi University, instruction has largely drawn on academic texts produced for Japanese audiences. Although these materials are intellectually rich—engaging with topics such as Shinto cosmology, traditional theatre, and aesthetic concepts like wabi or mono no aware—they are not oriented toward Vietnamese learners, nor do they follow the organizing logic of an undergraduate curriculum. What results is less a designed course than an assemblage of excerpts.

This reliance on compilation points to a broader issue. As cultural knowledge moves across linguistic and institutional boundaries, its intelligibility cannot be taken for granted. The difficulty lies not in access, but in organization—in the absence of structures that make connections traceable and meanings interpretable across contexts (Liddicoat, 2011; McConachy, 2018).

For students in the Department of Japanese Studies, this condition is particularly pronounced. Their engagement with Japanese culture is mediated and comparative. Although they work through the Japanese language, they remain outside its lived context; understanding emerges through movement between cultural frames rather than immersion within one. Under such conditions, exposure alone is insufficient. What becomes necessary are forms of organization that enable relations to be made.

While intercultural competence and the representation of culture in textbooks have been widely discussed, the organization of stand-alone culture courses—especially in foreign language programs situated outside the target context—remains relatively underexamined. Materials development has tended to privilege language skills, with culture positioned instrumentally. When culture becomes the object of study, however, the problem shifts: how knowledge is sequenced, how elements are connected, and how meanings are revisited over time.

It is within this tension—between access and coherence, between information and interpretation—that the present study is situated. Rather than presupposing what a suitable textbook should contain, it takes learners' perspectives as its point of departure, asking:

To what extent do students perceive the need for a course-specific textbook in Japanese Traditional Culture courses?

- What patterns emerge in their expectations regarding content, structure, and pedagogical design?
- How do these expectations position cultural knowledge—as practical, conceptual, or integrative?
- In what ways can these orientations inform the design of contextualized materials that support intercultural interpretive competence?

The section that follows situates these questions within existing work on materials development, contextualization, and instructional design, outlining the conceptual frame for the analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Materials Development Beyond Input Delivery

In language education, materials are often treated as vehicles for delivering linguistic input, but they also embody underlying assumptions about learning, teaching, and knowledge organization (Harwood, 2010). Such a view underestimates their structural influence. Yet such a view underestimates their structural influence. Materials do more than present content; they organize how knowledge unfolds over time—what is foregrounded, what is revisited, and how relationships between ideas are made visible (Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 2011; Mishan & Timmis, 2015). As Richards (2001) argues, materials are embedded within a broader curricular ecology, carrying implicit assumptions about learning trajectories and outcomes. Tomlinson (2011) similarly emphasizes that effective materials do not simply transmit information but shape the conditions under which engagement becomes possible.

The structuring role of materials comes into view most clearly when culture no longer occupies a supporting position but becomes the object of study itself. At that point, the task shifts. Materials are not simply organizing discrete skills; they are asked to mediate entry into systems of meaning. Religious practices, aesthetic categories, and social rituals do not present themselves as bounded units. Their significance takes shape through their relations—through how they are placed in proximity to one another and made to speak across contexts. The question, then, is not only what to include, but how elements are arranged, brought into relation, and opened up to interpretation.

Within materials development research, however, the focus has remained largely anchored in language skills, with culture either folded in as background or treated descriptively. Much less attention has been given to what it takes to sustain coherence when cultural knowledge itself forms the core of the curriculum. This gap becomes especially evident in higher education contexts where learners engage with the target culture from a distance, without the stabilizing reference of lived experience to ground interpretation.

B. Contextualization as Epistemic Alignment

The idea that no textbook can be universally appropriate is by now widely accepted (Tomlinson, 1995). In practice, however, what passes as “contextualization” is often reduced to surface adjustments—simplifying language, modifying examples, or inserting local references. While such measures may improve accessibility, they do little to address deeper misalignments between the assumptions built into materials and the ways learners actually engage with and interpret content.

A more substantive understanding of contextualization begins with how learners are positioned in relation to knowledge. Within intercultural frameworks, understanding is not conceived as the accumulation of cultural facts, but as the capacity to interpret across frames of reference (Byram, 2020; McConachy & Liddicoat, 2021; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; McConachy, 2018).

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Intercultural perspectives on language teaching likewise shift attention away from the accumulation of information toward the processes through which learners interpret and position themselves in relation to what they encounter (Liddicoat, 2011). Seen in this light, contextualization cannot be reduced to a set of external adjustments; it operates instead as an underlying principle that organizes how engagement with content becomes possible in the first place.

For students studying Japanese culture in Vietnam, the relationship to the target culture is necessarily mediated rather than grounded in direct experience. Engagement takes shape through comparison—at times explicit, at times implicit—with familiar cultural frames. What is required, then, extends beyond comprehension to the capacity to move between perspectives. This places specific demands on instructional materials: cultural knowledge cannot be presented as a closed, internally coherent system, but must remain open to relational interpretation.

From this perspective, the difficulty lies less in the availability of content than in its organization. Cultural topics may be wide-ranging, yet remain only loosely connected at a conceptual level, providing little basis for linking everyday practices to the principles that inform them (Liddicoat, 2011; McConachy, 2018). For advanced learners, such disjunction does more than reduce engagement; it constrains the very conditions under which interpretive understanding can take shape.

C. Needs Analysis in Culture-Focused Instruction

Rather than treating materials development as an intuitive or ad hoc endeavor, established traditions in instructional design have consistently framed it as a staged and recursive process, moving through interrelated phases such as analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Japan Foundation, 2016; Nation & Macalister, 2010; Mishan & Timmis, 2015). In most such formulations, needs analysis is not merely one component among others but functions as an initial point of orientation, delineating what is to be taught and whose purposes the materials are expected to serve before the design work properly begins.

In the context of culture-focused courses, however, such a procedural understanding quickly proves limited. Learner needs cannot be reduced to a list of topics to be included or excluded. They are also shaped by how learners understand the role of cultural knowledge in their own academic trajectories and anticipated professional practices. From this perspective, needs analysis becomes less a technical step and more a way of making visible how learners relate to the knowledge they are asked to engage with (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Recent studies in intercultural language education highlight this change. Learners are no longer seen as passive recipients of cultural knowledge. Instead, they are viewed as active participants in creating meaning. They interpret, compare, and position themselves within various cultural contexts, sometimes agreeing with them and sometimes critically assessing them (Liddicoat, 2011; Deardorff, 2006). Under this view, “need” cannot be reduced to the demand for more content. What comes into focus instead is the demand for intelligibility: learners require ways of organizing cultural material so that everyday practices can be read in relation to the principles that give them coherence, and so that movement between the familiar and the unfamiliar becomes thinkable rather than opaque.

From this perspective, the issue moves beyond the straightforward identification of learner wants to an examination of how such wants are themselves constituted through particular orientations to knowledge. This becomes especially salient in contexts defined by distance from the target culture, such as among students of Japanese culture in Vietnam. Under these conditions, it is difficult to assume a stable or homogeneous set of needs; what requires attention instead is how learners’ expectations are shaped and mediated by the specific configurations of their educational environment.

The present study takes this as its point of departure. Instead of presupposing what a culture-oriented textbook should contain, it turns to learner perspectives as a primary source of insight, treating needs analysis as an interpretive process that informs, rather than merely precedes, materials development.

D. Analytical Framework

The preceding discussion points to a shared concern: cultural learning is shaped not only by what is presented, but by how knowledge is organized, situated, and made available for interpretation. To examine how these concerns surface in learners’ own accounts, the study adopts an analytic frame organized around three interrelated dimensions: content, structure, and pedagogy.

The first dimension, content, addresses both thematic orientation and the balance between breadth and depth. Student selections are not treated as isolated preferences, but as indications of how cultural knowledge is construed—whether as usable information, as conceptual understanding, or as a configuration of the two.

The second dimension, structure, turns to how materials are internally organized, including sequencing, terminology support, and the use of visual scaffolding. Structure is not approached as a neutral container through which content is delivered; it participates in the production of meaning itself. Work in EFL contexts has repeatedly shown that the organization and explicitness of materials shape learners’ capacity to interpret cultural content (Baker, 2015; Tomlinson, 2011). The third dimension, pedagogy, concerns anticipated modes of engagement. This includes expectations related to comparison, experiential involvement, and application. Such expectations indicate how learners imagine working with cultural knowledge—whether as something to be observed, analyzed, or applied across contexts. In this respect, pedagogy is understood less in terms of classroom technique than as an orientation toward interpretation, consistent with intercultural approaches to language learning (Liddicoat, 2011; Deardorff, 2006). Considered together, these three dimensions do more than register what students say they prefer; they make it possible to see how learners situate themselves vis-à-vis the study of culture. This aligns with the study’s broader methodological orientation, in which quantitative tendencies are read in conjunction with qualitative accounts so that patterns of distribution can be interpreted alongside the meanings they carry.

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The framework is not advanced as a rigid classificatory grid. It functions instead as a heuristic for ordering emergent regularities while remaining attentive to the conditions under which they are expressed. In this sense, it serves as a point of articulation between the theoretical concerns outlined earlier and the interpretive mode of analysis developed in what follows.

METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study adopts a needs analysis approach situated within an instructional design perspective (Japan Foundation, 2016). Rather than treating needs analysis as a preliminary step that precedes material development, it is understood here as a learner-centered and interpretive process—one that brings into view how learners orient themselves toward cultural knowledge (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

The study does not set out to evaluate existing teaching materials. Instead, it focuses on how learners themselves make sense of a culture-focused course and the kind of structure they consider necessary for engaging with it. Framed in this way, the research design shifts attention away from documenting preferences as isolated choices. What matters is how those preferences point to underlying assumptions about what it means to learn culture.

B. Participants

This study adopts a needs

The participants were all in their third or fourth year of study, having accumulated a substantial foundation in Japanese prior to the research. Their proficiency may be characterized as spanning the upper-intermediate to advanced range, corresponding in general terms to JLPT levels N3 through N2.

At this stage in their academic development, language study ceases to operate as a self-contained objective. Rather, it becomes interwoven with emerging professional orientations. Engagement with the language is thus accompanied by increasing expectations: students must navigate academic discourse and make sense of cultural materials in ways that anticipate future roles—whether in teaching, translation, or intercultural mediation. Their responses, therefore, reflect more than present classroom experience; they also index how cultural knowledge is being reframed in light of its anticipated applications beyond the university setting.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously.

C. Instrument

Data were collected through a questionnaire that combined closed-ended and open-ended items. The instrument was designed around three dimensions introduced in the analytical framework: the perceived necessity of a course-specific textbook, preferred content domains, and expectations regarding structure and pedagogy. Where appropriate, respondents were allowed to select multiple options in order to reflect the multidimensional nature of cultural learning.

An open-ended prompt was included to allow participants to express their perspectives in their own terms. Rather than being treated as supplementary, these responses were incorporated as a substantive dimension of the dataset. Structured items may render certain patterns discernible, yet they offer limited insight into the interpretive processes through which learners engage with cultural knowledge. The open-ended data, in this sense, make it possible to trace the reasoning that underlies those patterns. Selected excerpts are therefore included in the Findings section, where they serve to ground and extend the analysis.

Prior to its administration, the questionnaire was carefully reviewed to ensure both clarity of expression and coherence in the presentation of key concepts.

D. Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online at a time when the Japanese Traditional Culture course was not running. This was not incidental. By stepping outside the rhythm of the course, the data collection avoided being shaped by the immediacy of assignments or evaluation, allowing responses to draw instead on more distanced reflections on learning.

Participants were made aware that the study was oriented toward the development of future teaching materials, and that what they reported would remain unrelated to any form of academic assessment.

The dataset ultimately comprised 64 valid responses, all of which were included in the analysis.

E. Data Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed online at a time when the Japanese Traditional Culture course was not running. This was not. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to identify general patterns in students' responses. Distributions across the main variables—such as perceived necessity and preferred textbook features—were described using frequencies and percentages (see Tables 1 and 2). These figures are not mobilized for statistical inference; rather, they serve to make visible patterns that carry interpretive weight within the scope of the study.

The qualitative data were approached through an inductive process of thematic coding. Categories were not specified in advance but allowed to emerge from recurrent ways in which students framed their understanding of cultural knowledge. Particular attention was paid to the orientations embedded in these accounts—whether they foregrounded practical application, emphasized conceptual understanding, or attempted to bring the two into relation. The two strands of analysis were considered together rather than separately. Quantitative patterns provide a sense of distribution, but they do not explain why those patterns emerge. The

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qualitative data help address this by making visible the reasoning that underlies students' choices. To make these connection transparent, selected excerpts are presented alongside numerical results in the Findings section.

Across both strands of analysis, the concern was less with cataloguing preferences than with tracing how learners locate themselves in relation to cultural study. Read in this way, responses do not function as endpoints but as entry points into broader orientations toward knowledge. Such an approach aligns with interpretive strands of needs analysis in instructional design, where learner input is treated not as a set of discrete choices, but as evidence of how engagement with knowledge is being configured.

F. Methodological Considerations

The study does not aim to extend its claims beyond the institutional context in which the data were collected. Its findings are thus better read as situated accounts, shaped by the particular conditions of that setting rather than as statements intended for broad generalization.

At the same time, the use of descriptive quantitative measures alongside qualitative thematic analysis reflects a mixed-methods orientation familiar within applied linguistics research (Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 2011). This combination allows patterns of distribution to be observed without losing sight of how learners themselves construct meaning in their responses.

More fundamentally, the methodological choices made here are inseparable from the study's underlying theoretical commitments. Materials development is not approached here as a purely technical task, but as something shaped by how learners understand and engage with knowledge within a particular educational and cultural context.

FINDINGS

One of the most consistent findings concerns the perceived necessity of developing a course-specific textbook. As shown in Table 1, an overwhelming majority of respondents expressed strong support for this need.

Table 1. Students' Perceived Necessity of a Course-Specific Textbook (N = 64)

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very necessary	35	54.7
Necessary	28	43.8
Not necessary	1	1.6
Total	64	100.0

Note. Percentages may not total exactly 100% due to rounding.

More specifically, 54.7% of respondents identified a course-specific textbook as "very necessary," and a further 43.8% selected "necessary," leaving only 1.6% indicating otherwise. Such convergence is difficult to attribute merely to a preference for institutional uniformity; it more plausibly reflects a degree of dissatisfaction with the current dependence on dispersed and unintegrated materials.

The responses resist consolidation into any single, uniform pattern. What they suggest instead is a differentiated way of orienting to cultural knowledge. The highest concentration of selections falls on everyday practices, social etiquette, and religious elements embedded in daily life, indicating a sensitivity to culture as it becomes visible within concrete communicative situations.

This emphasis on the observable, however, does not entail the exclusion of more abstract dimensions. A notable proportion of responses also foregrounded foundational cultural characteristics and traditional artistic forms. What emerges, then, is not a division between "practical" and "academic" knowledge, but an expectation that the two be held in relation—where everyday practices are intelligible through the historical and aesthetic frameworks that underlie them.

Responses relating to textbook design further sharpen this picture. As indicated in Table 2, students showed a clear preference for materials that are systematically organized and supported by precise, accessible terminology.

Table 2. Students' Preferred Features of the Textbook

Feature	Percentage (%)
Systematic organization	81.2
Clear terminology support	79.7
Real-life application	68.8
Visual materials	67.2

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Language practice activities	25.0
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Note. Respondents were allowed to select multiple options; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%.

Features such as systematic organization (81.2%) and clear terminology support (79.7%) received the strongest endorsement, followed by real-life application (68.8%) and the use of visual materials (67.2%). In contrast, language practice activities were selected far less frequently (25.0%). Read together, these preferences point less to a demand for additional activities than to an expectation that cultural knowledge be coherently structured and explicitly guided, rather than presented as a series of discrete elements.

The qualitative data sharpen this picture. A number of students characterized existing materials as “fragmented” or “disconnected,” often referring to slides or isolated readings that lack an evident trajectory. Others called for a narrower range of topics treated in greater depth. Cross-cultural comparison—especially between Japanese and Vietnamese contexts—also recurs as a valued mode of engagement, suggesting a desire for frameworks that make cultural differences interpretable rather than merely observable.

As one student noted, “The materials we used felt disconnected, and it was difficult to see how different topics were related.” Another respondent observed that “learning too many topics without depth makes it hard to remember or apply them.”

Read together, the findings suggest that the issue is not one of quantity, but of organization: what is being called for is a more coherent and integrative structuring of cultural knowledge through which it becomes interpretable.

DISCUSSION

The findings point less to a lack of cultural content than to a lack of coherence in how that content is organized. What students repeatedly highlight is not the absence of topics, but the difficulty of seeing how those topics relate to one another. In this sense, the issue is structural: cultural knowledge is encountered as fragments rather than as a connected system.

What these findings call into question is a view of culture as something to be accumulated piece by piece. In the context of advanced language learning, culture appears instead as an interpretive domain: its meaning does not reside in discrete topics, but takes shape in the connections that bind practices, concepts, and contexts together.

At first glance, the strong orientation toward everyday cultural practices might be read as evidence of a predominantly pragmatic focus. Yet when considered alongside the equally marked interest in foundational characteristics and artistic traditions, this reading becomes less tenable. The two domains are not treated as separate. Everyday practices seem to acquire significance precisely through their connection to broader cultural logics. In this sense, the familiar divide between “practical” and “high” culture is unsettled; learners appear to move across these levels, rather than positioning them as distinct.

The preference for systematic organization and clear terminology support further reinforces this interpretation. These are not indicators of a desire to simplify content. On the contrary, they suggest an awareness that cultural understanding entails conceptual complexity. Structure, here, functions not as a limitation, but as a necessary condition for interpretation to take place.

This orientation aligns with developments in intercultural language education, where learning is increasingly framed in terms of interpretation, comparison, and positioning rather than the acquisition of cultural facts (Liddicoat, 2011; Deardorff, 2006, McConachy, 2018). What is notable here is that such expectations emerge among learners who engage with the target culture from outside its lived environment. Interpretive engagement, in other words, is not limited to immersion contexts.

The relatively limited weight given to language practice activities is, in itself, telling. It indicates that students do not frame the course as an extension of skills training. Instead, it is treated as a space oriented toward inquiry, where the emphasis shifts from performing language to working through the meaning of cultural phenomena.

From this perspective, the findings do not so much call for additional content as they unsettle how culture is currently organized within foreign language programs. What comes into focus is the need for structures that allow meanings to be revisited, connected, and reinterpreted across contexts, rather than simply accumulated.

TOWARD A CONTEXTUALIZED TEXTBOOK: DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The survey findings do not point toward a fixed table of contents. What they suggest, instead, is a set of conditions that instructional materials must meet in order to support meaningful engagement with cultural knowledge. The issue is not which topics to include, but how knowledge is structured and made available for interpretation. In this sense, the findings are less prescriptive than indicative: they point toward design principles grounded in how learners position themselves in relation to cultural study.

Within curriculum design, materials are less a means of delivery than an outcome of design choices. What they contain—and how that content unfolds—reflects decisions about sequencing, the relations established across elements, and the particular ways in which learners are imagined and addressed (Nation & Macalister, 2010; Graves, 2008).

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Coherence as structure, not presentation

Students' strong preference for systematic organization (81.2%) suggests a concern with progression rather than mere accumulation. A textbook for this course, then, cannot simply assemble themes—religion, theatre, aesthetics—as self-contained units. What seems to be called for instead is a set of conceptual threads that reappear, shift, and deepen across the trajectory of the course.

Aesthetic principles, for example, should not remain confined to artistic domains but reappear in discussions of social conduct and communicative restraint. Similarly, religious syncretism should not be treated solely as historical background but revisited when examining ritual practices or spatial symbolism. Coherence here is not a matter of simplification, but of deliberate sequencing and cross-referencing that make relationships visible.

Linking practice and principle

The findings do not support a view of practical knowledge and conceptual understanding as competing priorities. Rather, everyday cultural practices are expected to become intelligible through their relation to broader historical and philosophical frameworks. This, in turn, points to the need for forms of textbook organization that permit movement across levels of abstraction, instead of maintaining a division between “daily life” and “high culture.”

Gift-giving, taken as a point of entry, can be followed into broader logics of reciprocity and social harmony; architectural minimalism, in a different way, returns us to aesthetic concepts encountered earlier. The issue is not one of collapsing distinctions, but of mapping the relations through which everyday practices become interpretable in light of the principles that sustain them.

Comparison as an organizing logic

In this context, cross-cultural comparison is not something that can be appended after the fact; it is already the condition under which engagement takes place. Japanese culture is encountered relationally, read through the coordinates of learners' own cultural frameworks rather than from any neutral standpoint.

Seen this way, comparison cannot be treated as an occasional activity but needs to be built into the design of materials themselves—surfacing in prompts, in case-based work, and in the juxtaposition of parallel examples. Yet its function is not to draw neat correspondences. What matters is its capacity to make differences more sharply perceptible, so that the organizing logics of each cultural context can be brought into view.

Terminology as a cumulative system

The strong emphasis on terminology support (79.7%) points to an expectation that engagement will take place at a conceptual level. Terms such as wabi, mono no aware, or ma resist reduction to brief, fixed definitions without a corresponding loss of meaning.

This makes it difficult to treat terminology as something that can be fixed in place, as if a glossary were sufficient. Instead, terms have to circulate—returning in different chapters, taking on meaning through context, and entering into relations with other concepts. Under such conditions, vocabulary is no longer a set of discrete items, but part of a cumulative process through which understanding is gradually formed.

Visual and experiential mediation

The weighting given to visual materials (67.2%) and real-life application (68.8%) points to a limit of abstraction when it stands alone. Yet this does not license a decorative use of visuals. Diagrams, images, and case-based materials are expected to carry analytic force—making relations legible, following lines of development, or laying out spatial and symbolic configurations.

Experiential elements—such as scenario-based tasks or guided observation—can then operate at the interface between conceptual knowledge and lived practice. Their function is not to approximate immersion, but to secure a point of anchoring from which interpretation can proceed.

Interpretation over performance

The comparatively low weighting of language practice activities (25.0%) indicates that students do not position the course as a continuation of skills-based instruction. It is approached, instead, as a space oriented toward inquiry.

On this basis, textbook activities would need to shift in emphasis—toward interpretation, discussion, and reflection. Rather than rehearsing linguistic forms, tasks can be designed to engage learners in analyzing cultural phenomena, juxtaposing perspectives, and articulating their own lines of understanding.

Depth over coverage

The preference for depth, finally, suggests that coverage is not the central concern. For advanced learners, a textbook does not need to approximate encyclopedic scope. It may be more productive to work with a smaller set of themes, developed over time and connected through recurring concepts that sustain engagement.

Seen in this light, contextualization cannot be reduced to the adjustment of examples to fit local settings. It operates at the level of design: in how materials are structured in relation to the ways learners engage with cultural knowledge. The aim is neither to domesticate the target culture nor to leave it suspended as an abstract body of information, but to open a space in which learners can move—analytically and reflexively—across cultural frames.

While these considerations arise from a particular institutional setting, their implications extend more broadly. If culture is taken as a central domain in foreign language education, then materials development must address not only what is presented, but how knowledge is organized, connected, and made available for interpretation.

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CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The point of departure for this study was a recurring observation: the availability of academically rigorous materials does not, in itself, ensure meaningful understanding. What emerges from the findings is that the difficulty lies less in access to information than in the way it is organized. In the absence of a framework that enables connections to be made, cultural knowledge tends to remain fragmented and resistant to interpretation.

Based on data collected from students in the Department of Japanese Studies at Hanoi University, a consistent orientation becomes visible. Cultural knowledge is not approached as a collection of discrete elements, but as something that must be coherent, layered, and open to interpretation. Everyday practices are valued, yet their significance is contingent on their relation to broader historical, aesthetic, and philosophical frameworks. Conceptual depth, in this context, is not treated as abstract or removed; it is expected to remain anchored in lived relevance. Structure, accordingly, is not experienced as a limitation, but as a necessary condition for understanding.

The contribution of this study lies in shifting how textbook development for culture-focused courses is conceptualized. Rather than treating materials as collections of content to be assembled, the findings point toward design as an organizing principle. Design here involves more than sequencing or layout. It requires the deliberate construction of relationships—across topics, between levels of abstraction, and between cultural frameworks—so that knowledge can be revisited and reinterpreted over time.

By situating these principles in learners' perspectives, the study enters into ongoing discussions in materials development and intercultural pedagogy from a slightly different angle. What comes into focus is not simply the presence of cultural content, but the conditions under which that content becomes meaningful—particularly the roles of structural coherence and epistemic alignment in contexts where learners engage with the target culture from outside its lived environment.

At the same time, the study remains bounded in scope. The data derive from a single institutional setting and reflect the views of one cohort of learners; the findings should therefore be read as situated rather than broadly generalizable. Moreover, the analysis is concerned with perceived needs rather than with the implementation of materials in practice. Whether the design principles outlined here lead to observable changes in learning outcomes is a question that extends beyond the present study.

Further work could proceed along several lines. One direction would involve the development of prototype materials based on these principles, followed by classroom-based evaluation with attention to student engagement and the development of interpretive capacities. Another would be comparative inquiry across institutions and national contexts, in order to examine whether similar orientations toward cultural knowledge emerge elsewhere. Such work would help clarify whether the tensions identified here—between breadth and coherence, or between practical and conceptual knowledge—are locally produced or more widely shared.

At a broader level, the findings call into question how culture is positioned within foreign language curricula. Once it is taken not as a supplementary element but as a field of inquiry in its own right, the design of materials can no longer remain at the level of content selection alone; it must be underpinned by a corresponding degree of intellectual rigor. For learners preparing to become educators, translators, or intercultural mediators, cultural understanding is not an optional extension of language proficiency, but part of their professional formation.

Seen from this perspective, the development of a textbook for the Japanese Traditional Culture course at Hanoi University is not merely a matter of curricular adjustment (Hanoi University, 2024). It opens onto a space in which the structuring of cultural knowledge itself becomes a question—one shaped by learners who approach it from a position of informed distance, working analytically, comparatively, and within a coherently designed framework. What is at stake, then, is not simply what is taught, but the conditions that make it possible for learners to move between cultural frameworks

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