

Perceptions of Cultural Representation in Japanese Language Textbooks: Insights From Students and Teachers in Indonesian Higher Education

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Abstract—This study investigates how students and teachers in Japanese language programs at Indonesian universities perceive cultural representations in widely used textbooks and how these perceptions inform the need for intercultural-oriented learning design. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a questionnaire completed by 68 undergraduate students and semi-structured interviews with six experienced instructors. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative responses were thematically coded based on Byram’s Intercultural Communicative Competence and Moran’s 4P cultural framework. Findings reveal that both students and teachers value the integration of linguistic and cultural learning but recognize an imbalance between grammatical focus and intercultural contextualization. *Marugoto* is perceived as culturally authentic and communicative, while *Minna no Nihongo* is praised for structural clarity but limited in fostering cultural reflection. Students expressed a preference for interactive, visual, and relatable cultural content, whereas teachers emphasized their mediating role in linking cultural concepts to learners’ experiences. The study concludes that an integrative textbook design, combining grammatical rigor with reflective intercultural engagement is essential for developing intercultural competence. The proposed 4P + IC framework highlights how cultural representation can serve not only as learning material but as a bridge to intercultural understanding in Japanese language education.

Index Terms—Japanese language textbooks, cultural representation, intercultural competence, students’ and teachers’ perceptions, higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

In today’s era of globalization, language education is increasingly recognized as a means of developing linguistic proficiency and as a bridge toward cultivating intercultural understanding (Arnawa & Arafah, 2023; Némethová, 2020; Patricia Diane et al., 2024). As emphasized by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence extends beyond grammatical mastery; it encompasses the capacity to communicate meaningfully and appropriately across cultural boundaries while embodying openness, curiosity, and empathy. Recent analyses of global language education trends further confirm that intercultural competence has become a central pedagogical concern, yet it remains underexplored in Japanese language education compared to other domains such as technology or motivation (Goh et al., 2024; Munezane, 2025; Risda et al., 2025). This aligns with recent pedagogical evidence showing that interactive and collaborative learning environments significantly enhance learners’ communication performance and cultural engagement (Arafah et al., 2023; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a, 2023b). From this perspective, language learning is not just the acquisition of words and rules, but also an intellectual and emotional engagement with diverse cultural ways of seeing and being.

Textbooks occupy a pivotal position among the factors shaping this process (Peskoller, 2025). They are not only linguistic guides but also cultural mediators who frame how learners perceive and make sense of the target society, its people, values, and everyday life (Nushi & Aghaei, 2024). In Japanese language education, textbooks such as *Minna no Nihongo*, *Marugoto*, and *Irodori* play particularly influential roles in teaching kanji. Through dialogues, visual illustrations, and communicative tasks, these materials introduce learners to both language structures and Japanese social norms, customs, and practices. In doing so, they implicitly construct an image of “Japan” that becomes part of students’ cultural imagination.

However, as highlighted in numerous studies, the portrayal of culture in foreign language textbooks remains limited (Bose & Gao, 2022). Cultural representations often center on visible or celebratory aspects such as festivals, food, and

traditional clothing while overlooking deeper cultural perspectives and opportunities for critical reflection (Kramsch, 2013; Risager, 2023; Yuen, 2011). Such portrayals frequently perpetuate idealized or stereotypical depictions of the target culture, which may hinder learners' ability to develop critical cultural awareness and interpretive flexibility (Taqdir, 2025). Such portrayals risk reinforcing static or stereotypical views of the target culture and may hinder the development of genuine intercultural awareness among learners (Hilliard, 2015). Within the Indonesian context, where Japanese language education has expanded rapidly in recent decades, these limitations are particularly significant. Research in this field still largely focuses on linguistic or methodological aspects, leaving a gap in studies examining how cultural content in Japanese textbooks is perceived and internalized by learners (Taqdir et al., 2025). University students today are increasingly motivated to study Japanese not only for linguistic competence but also for academic exchange, professional mobility, and cross-cultural engagement (Futagami, 2021; Ward et al., 2024).

While existing research has examined how culture is represented in Japanese language textbooks, fewer studies have explored how these representations are perceived by students and teachers, the primary users who interpret, adapt, and internalize them in classroom practice. Understanding their perspectives is essential because teachers serve as cultural mediators, framing and contextualizing content, while students' interpretations reveal how textbooks foster intercultural understanding.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the perceptions of students and teachers regarding cultural representations in Japanese language textbooks used in Indonesian higher education institutions. It seeks to uncover how they evaluate the authenticity, diversity, and pedagogical relevance of cultural content and how these materials facilitate or fail to facilitate intercultural learning in their classes.

Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Examine students' and teachers' perceptions of cultural representation in widely used Japanese language textbooks (Minna no Nihongo, Marugoto, and Irodori).
2. Identify which aspects of cultural content are perceived as authentic, diverse, and educationally meaningful by the target audience.
3. Explore the perceived gaps between existing cultural representations and the intercultural learning needs of Indonesian learners.
4. This study offers insights and pedagogical implications for developing more intercultural-oriented Japanese language materials.

To achieve these aims, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students and teachers perceive cultural representations in Japanese language textbooks?
2. What types of cultural content are considered relevant or lacking in supporting intercultural learning?
3. How do these perceptions inform the need for an intercultural-oriented learning design in Japanese language education in Indonesia?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Cultural Representation in Language Textbooks

Textbooks serve as both linguistic resources and ideological instruments that shape learners' cultural understanding. According to Hall (1997), representation involves constructing meaning through language, symbols, and discourse. In the context of language education, cultural representation refers to how textbooks portray the people, values, and social practices of the target culture (Kramsch, 2013). Recent bibliometric research has revealed that textbooks worldwide often perpetuate selective cultural or social portrayals, including gendered stereotypes that mirror broader ideological biases embedded within educational materials (Taqdir et al., 2025). These portrayals influence how learners imagine the cultural "Other" and position themselves within intercultural encounters.

Previous research has shown that foreign language textbooks often reflect selective and sometimes stereotypical depictions of target cultures. Risager (2023) and Yuen (2011) note that such materials tend to highlight surface-level cultural elements, such as festivals, cuisine, and customs, while neglecting deeper perspectives, such as values, identities, and power relations. Consequently, textbooks may present an idealized and homogenized view of the target society, limiting opportunities for intercultural reflection.

This semiotic process of meaning construction aligns with recent analyses of media texts, which demonstrate that cultural representation operates through signs and symbols that convey implicit ideological values (Hasyim & Arifah, 2023a, 2023b). In educational materials, such as textbooks, similar semiotic mechanisms influence how learners interpret cultural messages and internalize social meanings.

B. Intercultural Competence and Pedagogical Implications

Intercultural competence (IC) has become a central goal in modern language education. It refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Byram's model emphasizes five components: *savoir être* (attitudes), *savoirs* (knowledge), *savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating), *savoir faire* (skills of discovery and interaction), and *savoirs' engager* (critical cultural awareness).

Textbooks play a key role in developing IC when they present culture not as a static body of facts, but as a dynamic process of meaning-making. Kramsch (1993, 2013) argues that effective language learning materials should help learners compare, interpret, and critically engage with their own and the target cultures. However, studies have shown that many textbooks lack such dialogic dimensions, resulting in limited intercultural growth (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Sercu, 2005).

C. Japanese Language Textbooks and Cultural Content

In Japanese language education, textbooks such as *Minna no Nihongo*, *Marugoto*, and *Irodori* have become standard teaching resources. *Marugoto*, developed under the Japan Foundation's JF Standard, explicitly integrates cultural communication into language activities. *Irodori* is an open-access textbook that promotes everyday communication skills contextualized in Japanese society. Despite these efforts, recent studies (Ciubăncan, 2022; Šukelj, 2019) have pointed out that representations of culture in these materials still emphasize the "Japaneseness" of daily life while offering limited perspectives on cultural diversity or intercultural dialogue.

D. Studies on Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions

While numerous studies have analyzed the cultural content of textbooks, fewer have explored how learners and teachers perceive these representations. Learners' perceptions reflect how cultural materials are internalized, interpreted, and connected to their experiences (Dinh & Sharifian, 2017; Yuen, 2011). Teachers, on the other hand, act as mediators who interpret and contextualize cultural elements during instruction (Kuswanty et al, 2023; Sercu, 2005).

Research in various EFL and JFL contexts (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2022; Liu & Laohawiriyanon, 2012) suggests that both groups often feel that textbook materials insufficiently address intercultural comparisons or neglect local cultural perspectives. Similar challenges have been observed in Indonesia: students tend to perceive cultural content as informative but not dialogic, while teachers struggle to bridge the gap between target and local cultures in their teaching practice (Azizah et al., 2025; Taqdir et al., 2025).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by quantitative data to explore how students and teachers perceive cultural representations in Japanese language textbooks used in Indonesian higher-education institutions. The mixed data sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and viewpoints. This study focused on eliciting participants' perceptions, evaluations, and reflections, rather than directly analyzing textbook content.

B. Participants

The participants consisted of students and teachers from three Indonesian public universities where Japanese language programs are offered: Hasanuddin University, Universitas Negeri Semarang, and Universitas Riau.

- Students: A total of 68 undergraduate students who had completed at least two semesters of Japanese language learning participated in the survey. They were familiar with at least one of the commonly used textbooks: *Minna no Nihongo*, *Marugoto*, or *Irodori*.
- Teachers: Six instructors who actively teach Japanese at the university level participated in semi-structured interviews. They were selected based on their experience using these textbooks for at least one academic year.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that respondents were directly involved in Japanese language teaching and learning and had sufficient exposure to the analyzed textbooks.

C. Instruments

- Student Questionnaire

The student questionnaire consisted of two sections:

Closed-ended items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) measured perceptions of authenticity, diversity, and relevance of cultural content in textbooks.

Open-ended questions allowed students to express their opinions about how culture is represented and whether it supports their intercultural understanding.

- Teacher Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview questions explored teachers' perceptions of how cultural elements are presented in textbooks, their classroom experiences in teaching such content, and their views on the need for more intercultural-oriented learning design.

Both instruments were developed based on prior studies on cultural representation and intercultural learning in language education (e.g., Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007; Yuen, 2011; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) and reviewed by two experts in Japanese language education to ensure content validity.

D. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place over a three-month period in 2025.

- **Questionnaire Administration:**

The online questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to students at the three universities. Participation was voluntary, and the responses were collected anonymously.

- **Teacher Interviews:**

Follow-up interviews were conducted with teachers through Zoom or face-to-face meetings, lasting approximately 30–45 min each. Interviews were conducted in either Indonesian or Japanese, recorded with consent, and later transcribed for analysis.

E. Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Data (from Questionnaires):**

Responses to the Likert-scale items were analyzed descriptively using mean scores, frequency distributions, and percentages to capture the overall tendencies in students' perceptions.

- **Qualitative Data (from Open-ended Responses and Interviews):**

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes.

The coding focused on categories such as authenticity, cultural diversity, local–global comparison, intercultural relevance, and pedagogical implications.

Representative quotes from both students and teachers were selected to illustrate the key findings.

- **Triangulation:**

The quantitative and qualitative findings were compared and integrated to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the participants' perceptions and to strengthen the validity of the interpretations.

F. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Hasanuddin University. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained before data collection. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Overview of Participants

A total of 68 undergraduate students majoring in Japanese Language and Culture participated in this study. The participants represented three academic levels: *ichinensei* (first year), *ninensei* (second year), and *sannensei* (third year), covering a progression from beginner to intermediate proficiency in Japanese. The majority had been studying Japanese for up to three years and had received formal instruction in university-based language courses. This distribution allowed the study to capture a wide spectrum of learner experiences, from introductory exposure to increasingly complex linguistic and cultural engagements.

In terms of learning goals, most students were actively preparing for the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), primarily aiming for N4 to N3 levels, reflecting their academic commitment and professional aspirations. Their motivation to study Japanese was largely academic and career-oriented, particularly toward opportunities for study-abroad programs, internships, and future employment in Japan.

Regarding instructional materials, the students reported using a combination of *Marugoto: Nihon no Kotoba to Bunka* and *Minna no Nihongo* as their primary textbooks. This pairing represents a balanced pedagogical approach: *Marugoto* emphasizes communication and intercultural understanding through situational contexts, whereas *Minna no Nihongo* provides structured grammatical and lexical foundations for language learning. The complementary use of these materials illustrates ongoing institutional efforts to integrate linguistic competence and cultural literacy into Japanese language education.

In addition to the student participants, six Japanese language instructors were interviewed to provide qualitative perspectives on teaching practices and cultural content in textbooks. All instructors possessed between seven and 15 years of teaching experience, primarily at the university level. They consistently emphasized the importance of language–culture integration, noting that effective teaching requires contextual examples and authentic cultural materials that go beyond linguistic form to convey pragmatic and sociocultural nuances. Their insights provided valuable triangulation of the student data, enabling a holistic understanding of how intercultural elements are represented and interpreted in Japanese language classrooms.

B. Students' Perceptions of Cultural Representation in Textbooks

(a). Authenticity of Cultural Representation

The quantitative results indicate that most students perceive the cultural elements presented in their textbooks, particularly *Marugoto* and *Minna no Nihongo*, as authentic and reflective of real Japanese life. A large majority expressed strong interest in learning about Japanese culinary culture and dining etiquette (57.4%), as well as in workplace

communication and part-time job contexts (63.2%). Similarly, 60.3% of students agreed that incorporating popular culture such as anime, drama, and music, made lessons more relatable and contemporary.

These findings suggest that learners value cultural representations that mirror their everyday social interactions rather than idealized or ceremonial depictions. Authentic situations such as ordering food, engaging in small talk, or managing politeness at work help students connect linguistic forms to pragmatic meaning.

As one student commented,

“Materi percakapan yang menampilkan kebiasaan orang Jepang di kehidupan sehari-hari membuat saya merasa belajar sesuatu yang benar-benar digunakan, bukan hanya teori.” (The conversation material, which shows Japanese people's habits in everyday life, made me feel like I was learning something that is actually used, not just theory.)

Nevertheless, some students noted that *Minna no Nihongo* tends to portray Japan through a “textbook Japan” perspective—grammatically precise but culturally limited—whereas *Marugoto* offers more natural conversations with contextual background. This contrast highlights the pedagogical shift from linguistic accuracy to sociocultural authenticity in modern Japanese textbooks.

(b). *Diversity of Cultural Perspectives*

While most respondents appreciated the authentic content of *Marugoto*, fewer perceived it as being culturally diverse. The textbooks were seen as focusing primarily on standard Japanese culture centered on Tokyo-based norms, with limited exposure to regional and international perspectives. Several students expressed interest in topics related to university life, youth culture, and intercultural encounters, noting that such content could broaden their understanding of Japan as a heterogeneous society.

As one respondent mentioned,

“Saya ingin topik kehidupan mahasiswa lebih banyak, karena itu lebih dekat dengan pengalaman kami sendiri.” (I would like to see more topics about student life, as it is closer to our own experiences.)

Another noted that topics related to local dialects, regional festivals, and multicultural Japan would enrich their understanding of contemporary Japan. This suggests that although the existing materials introduce essential aspects of Japanese daily life, they still represent a relatively monolithic view of “Japaneseness”.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this perception aligns with prior critiques (e.g., Houghton, 2010; Saito, 2021) that Japanese textbooks often privilege mainstream norms and neglect peripheral or global voices. Students’ responses in this study reaffirm the need for greater representational diversity in Japanese language learning materials.

(c). *Relevance to Students’ Intercultural Learning*

Students’ perceptions also reflect a strong awareness of the intercultural dimensions of language learning. Most agreed that understanding Japanese values, such as harmony (*wa*), indirectness, and politeness, is important. For example, 63.2% of respondents wanted to learn explicitly about how to maintain group harmony, such as not interrupting conversations or avoiding overly direct statements.

In contrast, when asked whether it was sufficient to simply memorize expressions without understanding their cultural background, only 16.2% agreed, while the majority (over 70%) disagreed or were neutral. This demonstrates that students perceive cultural reasoning as integral to language learning rather than a secondary element.

As one student noted,

“Kalau tahu alasan di balik kebiasaan orang Jepang, kita jadi lebih mudah memahami cara mereka bicara.” (If we understand the reasons behind Japanese customs, it becomes easier to understand the way they speak.)

These responses highlight students’ readiness to engage in reflective and comparative learning linking Japanese cultural norms to their own Indonesian cultural experiences. The data also show a growing sense of intercultural awareness, aligning with Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, particularly in the components of knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness.

(d). *Need for Intercultural-Oriented Design*

When asked about their expectations for textbook improvement, students consistently emphasized the need for more interactive, context-rich, and visually engaging materials. Over two-thirds of respondents preferred learning through dialogues, role-plays, and visual scenarios that were directly connected to real-life communication. Open-ended responses revealed recurring suggestions, such as:

- integrating QR codes or online links to audio/video materials,
- presenting examples from youth or workplace culture, and
- combining *Marugoto*’s intercultural approach with *Minna no Nihongo*’s grammar focus.

Several students also proposed that textbooks should include cross-cultural comparison sections, for example, comparing Japanese and Indonesian expressions of politeness or disagreement to foster deeper reflection.

One comment summarized this expectation: “Kalau bisa, buku ajar juga menampilkan perbandingan antara budaya Jepang dan budaya kita, supaya kita bisa tahu kenapa cara berbicara mereka berbeda.” (If possible, textbooks should also include comparisons between Japanese culture and our own culture, so that we can understand why their way of speaking is different.)

Such feedback underscores a collective aspiration for textbooks that not only teach the language but also guide learners toward cultural empathy, adaptability, and reflection, which are key components of intercultural competence.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Thematic Dimension	Key Findings	Representative Evidence
Authenticity	Students perceive Marugoto as authentic and contextually realistic and prefer everyday situations.	"Materi percakapan membuat saya merasa belajar sesuatu yang benar-benar digunakan." ("The conversation materials make me feel like I'm learning something that is truly used in real life.")
Diversity	Textbooks still depict homogeneous cultures with limited regional or intercultural variety.	"Saya ingin topik kehidupan mahasiswa lebih banyak." (I want more topics about student life because they are closer to our own experiences.)
Relevance	Strong interest in cultural values (e.g., harmony, indirectness, and politeness). Students link culture and communication together.	"Kalau tahu alasan di balik kebiasaan orang Jepang, kita jadi lebih mudah memahami cara mereka bicara." (When I know the reasons behind Japanese customs, it becomes easier to understand how they speak.)
Intercultural Design Needs	Desire for interactive, comparative, and multimodal learning. A combination of grammar and culture is preferred.	"Kalau bisa, buku ajar juga menampilkan perbandingan antara budaya Jepang dan budaya kita." (If possible, the textbook should also include comparisons between Japanese culture and our own.)

C. Teachers' Perspectives on Cultural Content and Teaching Practice

(a). Teachers' Interpretation of Cultural Representation

Interviews with six instructors revealed that they generally viewed Marugoto and Minna no Nihongo as complementary yet distinct in their pedagogical orientation.

While Marugoto is valued for its cultural contextualization and focus on communication, Minna no Nihongo is appreciated for its structured grammar explanations and systematic sequencing suitable for beginner learners.

Most teachers agreed that Marugoto offers a more holistic depiction of Japanese life and communication styles, especially in showing how and why Japanese people use certain expressions.

One instructor remarked:

"Marugoto tidak hanya mengajarkan kata dan pola kalimat, tetapi juga konteks sosialnya. Misalnya, bagaimana orang Jepang berbicara sopan di tempat kerja atau kepada orang yang lebih tua." (Marugoto not only teaches words and sentence patterns, but also their social context. For example, how Japanese people speak politely at work or to older people.)

However, the teachers also noted that cultural representation in textbooks tends to remain surface-level, mainly limited to festivals, food, or customs. Deeper cultural dimensions, such as values, hierarchy, and social harmony (wa), often require additional explanations from the instructor. As another teacher observed:

"Buku ajar memperkenalkan budaya Jepang, tetapi mahasiswa sering hanya tahu permukaannya. Kita harus bantu jelaskan makna di balik kebiasaan itu." (Textbooks introduce Japanese culture, but students often only learn about the surface. We must help explain the meaning behind these customs.)

Thus, instructors perceive their role not only as language facilitators but also as cultural mediators responsible for connecting textbook content with learners' cultural contexts.

(b). Challenges in Teaching Intercultural Aspects

Despite their recognition of culture's importance, teachers encounter several recurring challenges when incorporating intercultural elements into their instruction.

The first challenge concerns students' limited exposure to real-life Japanese interactions. Without authentic input from native speakers or immersion experiences, learners may interpret cultural practices literally rather than pragmatically.

As one teacher stated:

"Mahasiswa bisa menghafal ungkapan, tapi mereka belum tentu tahu kapan dan kenapa ungkapan itu digunakan." (Students can memorise expressions, but they do not necessarily know when and why those expressions are used.)

The second challenge relates to time and curriculum limitations. As most Japanese language courses prioritize grammar and JLPT preparation, cultural discussions often become secondary.

"Kurikulum kita padat dengan materi, jadi kadang waktu untuk menjelaskan aspek budaya tidak cukup." (Our curriculum is packed with material, so sometimes there is not enough time to explain cultural aspects.)

Third, students tend to view Japanese culture as exotic or idealized rather than as a dynamic, diverse, and sometimes contradictory reality. Teachers expressed concern that this mindset can hinder critical reflection and comparative understanding.

(c). Strategies for Intercultural Teaching

In response to these challenges, instructors have employed various strategies to integrate culture more meaningfully into their teaching. The most common approach involves contextual supplementation, adding short videos, real-life dialogues, and online resources to extend textbook content. For instance, some teachers use clips from Japanese TV shows or YouTube to illustrate speech levels, gestures, and social norms.

“Saya sering menampilkan video percakapan asli agar mahasiswa melihat ekspresi dan gestur orang Jepang.” (I often show videos of real conversations so that students can see the expressions and gestures of Japanese people.)

Another key strategy is cultural comparison and reflections. Teachers often ask students to contrast Japanese and Indonesian social behaviors, such as expressing refusal, apologizing, or showing gratitude, to foster intercultural awareness.

“Saya minta mahasiswa membandingkan cara menolak permintaan dalam bahasa Jepang dan bahasa Indonesia. Dari situ mereka sadar bahwa kesopanan itu tidak sama di setiap budaya.” (I asked the students to compare how to refuse a request in Japanese and Indonesian. From this, they realised that politeness is not the same in every culture.)

Several teachers also integrate project-based or experiential learning, such as role-playing restaurant scenarios, simulating interviews, and preparing presentations about Japanese festivals. These activities allow students to experience culture rather than learn about it theoretically.

(d). *Suggestions for Future Textbook Design*

All six instructors emphasized the importance of developing textbooks that reflect intercultural realities rather than a single idealized image of Japan. They advocated for materials that integrate both language and critical cultural reflection, enabling learners to understand not only how Japanese people communicate, but also the sociocultural logic behind it.

Key recommendations include:

1. More authentic and localized materials, such as daily life stories from multiple Japanese regions and contexts.
2. Cross-cultural comparison sections that explicitly invite learners to reflect on their cultural norms.
3. Integration of digital resources, videos, online dialogues, and interactive exercises to support multimodal learning.
4. Simplified yet reflective explanations in Indonesian to bridge linguistic and cultural understanding.

As summarized by one instructor:

“Idealnya, buku ajar tidak hanya menunjukkan ‘apa itu budaya Jepang’, tetapi juga mengajak mahasiswa berpikir, ‘apa makna budaya ini bagi kita sebagai orang Indonesia yang belajar bahasa Jepang.’ (Ideally, textbooks should not only explain “what Japanese culture is”, but also encourage students to think about “what this culture means to us as Indonesians learning Japanese”.)

Such insights suggest that instructors envision a pedagogical model that combines communicative competence with critical cultural consciousness, aligning closely with Byram’s (1997) concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and Moran’s (2001) 4P framework (Products, Practices, Perspectives, and Persons).

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL CONTENT

Thematic Dimension	Key Insights	Representative Quotes
Interpretation	Teachers see Marugoto as more culturally rich, whereas Minna no Nihongo remains grammar-oriented.	“Marugoto tidak hanya mengajarkan kata dan pola kalimat, tetapi juga konteks sosialnya.” (Marugoto does not only teach words and sentence patterns but also the social context behind them.)
Challenges	Limited time, curriculum focus, and lack of authentic exposure hinder intercultural learning.	“Mahasiswa bisa menghafal ungkapan, tapi belum tentu tahu kapan dan kenapa digunakan.” (Students can memorize expressions, but that doesn’t mean they understand when and why to use them.)
Strategies	Use of video, role-play, and cross-cultural comparisons to enrich the cultural context.	“Saya minta mahasiswa membandingkan cara menolak permintaan dalam bahasa Jepang dan bahasa Indonesia.” (I ask students to compare how to refuse requests in Japanese and Indonesian.)
Suggestions	Future textbooks should integrate reflection, diversity, and digitalization.	“Idealnya, buku ajar tidak hanya menunjukkan budaya Jepang, tapi juga mengajak kita berpikir maknanya bagi kita.” (Ideally, textbooks should not only show Japanese culture but also encourage students to reflect on its meaning for themselves)

D. *Comparative Insights Between Students and Teachers*

(a). *Converging Perspectives: Shared Awareness of Cultural Importance*

Both students and teachers demonstrated a strong and consistent belief that cultural knowledge is inseparable from language learning. Students expressed appreciation for materials that portray everyday Japanese life, emphasizing how authentic settings (e.g., dining, greetings, and workplace communication) made lessons more engaging and meaningful.

Similarly, teachers highlighted that authenticity enhances motivation and comprehension, as it allows students to connect grammatical structures to real communicative purposes. This convergence shows a shared recognition that textbooks such as Marugoto, with its focus on “Language and Culture” serve as a useful platform for promoting cultural understanding. Both groups also agreed that the goal of Japanese language education should not be limited to linguistic accuracy, but should cultivate intercultural competence, enabling learners to interpret meanings within social and cultural contexts.

Student: “Materi percakapan yang menampilkan kebiasaan orang Jepang di kehidupan sehari-hari membuat saya merasa belajar sesuatu yang benar-benar digunakan.” (The conversation material, which shows Japanese people's habits in everyday life, makes me feel like I am learning something that is actually used.)

Teacher: “Marugoto tidak hanya mengajarkan bahasa, tapi juga nilai-nilai di balik penggunaannya.” (Marugoto not only teaches language, but also the values behind its use.)

These parallel viewpoints underscore a shared pedagogical value: culture is not supplementary, but constitutive of language education.

(b). Diverging Perspectives: Depth, Focus, and Pedagogical Challenges

Despite this common ground, several points of divergence have emerged. While students tend to evaluate textbooks from the perspective of engagement and relatability, teachers assess them in terms of their pedagogical depth and manageability. For instance, students preferred visual and interactive learning, requesting more images, QR-linked media, and contextual topics such as “university life,” “youth culture,” or “daily work communication.” In contrast, teachers expressed concern that adding such materials might extend preparation time and require curricular restructuring, particularly given the tight JLPT-oriented schedule.

Student: “Saya lebih suka kalau buku ajar punya QR code ke video, supaya bisa belajar pengucapan dan ekspresi.” (I would prefer if textbooks had QR codes linking to videos, so that I could learn pronunciation and expressions.)

Teacher: “Waktu kita terbatas karena target RPS, jadi penambahan aspek budaya sering harus disisipkan.” (Our time is limited due to the RPS (semester learning plan) targets, so cultural aspects often have to be added in.)

Furthermore, while students focused on surface-level cultural diversity (e.g., regional festivals or lifestyles), teachers emphasized deep cultural interpretation, understanding values such as hierarchy, group harmony, and social politeness. This divergence reveals the tension between cultural engagement (students' preferences) and cultural mediation (teachers' roles).

(c). Complementary Perspectives on Textbook Function

Interestingly, students and teachers' differing priorities often complement rather than contradict each other. Students want more interactive and comparative cultural content, while teachers advocate for materials that include guided reflection and cultural explanation. When combined, these perspectives suggest an ideal textbook design that merges student-centered engagement with teacher-guided interpretation of a dialogic model of intercultural learning. Both groups also agreed on the value of combining Marugoto and Minna no Nihongo in instruction. Students appreciated Minna no Nihongo for its clarity and systematic structure, but relied on Marugoto to make learning more communicative and culture-rich. Teachers saw this combination as pedagogically practical: Minna supports grammatical foundation, while Marugoto bridges it with real-life context.

Teacher: “Kalau digabung, keduanya saling melengkapi: Minna untuk struktur, Marugoto untuk konteks.” (When combined, the two complement each other: Minna for structure, Marugoto for context.)

This hybrid model aligns with current trends in task-based and intercultural pedagogy, which emphasize the integration of language form, function, and meaning within sociocultural contexts.

E. Integrating Language and Culture: From Knowledge to Competence

The findings in Sections B–D indicate a clear pedagogical consensus: both students and teachers perceive that language learning is inseparable from cultural understanding. This aligns with Byram's (1997) concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which posits that effective foreign language learning involves not only mastering linguistic forms but also developing the ability to interpret, relate, and reflect on cultural meanings.

Students demonstrated a growing awareness that knowing “what to say” is insufficient without understanding “why it is said that way.” Their appreciation for Marugoto's contextualized dialogues and cultural notes reflects an emerging capacity for “skills of interpreting and relating” two of Byram's core ICC components. Teachers, meanwhile, viewed their role as cultural mediators who must scaffold learners' movement from knowledge of culture (*savoirs*) to critical cultural awareness (*savoirs' engager*).

This dynamic represents a sociocultural learning process consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) notion of mediation, wherein teachers provide cultural tools and scaffolds that allow learners to internalize not only linguistic forms but also cultural meanings. The classroom thus becomes a zone of proximal development (ZPD) for intercultural understanding, where students learn to negotiate meaning between their own culture and the target culture. Such integration between linguistic competence and cultural understanding also resonates with the broader goals of digital and design-based pedagogy, where instructional materials are structured to promote contextualized learning and reflective engagement (Kaharuddin et al., 2023; Kaharuddin et al., 2025).

F. *Balancing Structural and Contextual Learning*

The data reveal a pedagogical tension between grammatical mastery (as represented by *Minna no Nihongo*) and contextual communicative competence (as represented by *Marugoto*). Students appreciate *Minna no Nihongo* for its structural clarity but often find it detached from real-life cultural contexts. In contrast, *Marugoto* is valued for its authenticity and communicative realism but is perceived as lighter in explicit grammar explanation.

This finding echoes Moran's (2001) 4P cultural model—Products, Practices, Perspectives, and Persons—where effective cultural learning requires integration across all four dimensions. *Minna no Nihongo* largely emphasizes Products (linguistic forms and expressions), whereas *Marugoto* extends to Practices (social use of language) and Perspectives (underlying values). However, both textbooks fall short in engaging the Person—the learner as an intercultural being capable of reflecting on their identity and perspective.

Therefore, curricular synthesis is required: a blended pedagogical model that retains *Minna*'s grammatical discipline while embracing *Marugoto*'s intercultural ethos. Such an approach can cultivate both linguistic accuracy and cultural empathy, ensuring that learners not only know the language but can also live the language in culturally appropriate ways. This dialogic relationship between structure and context reflects the interplay of global and local values in meaning-making, similar to how traditional ritual speech in the Tolaki Mekongga community encodes cultural wisdom and collective identity through language (Takwa et al., 2025).

G. *Students' Active Cultural Engagement and Teachers' Mediating Role*

The open-ended responses revealed students' strong motivation to learn Japanese through topics that are personally engaging (e.g., daily life, pop culture, and workplace communication). Their preference for relatable, visual, and interactive materials reflects a learner-centered orientation consistent with constructivist pedagogy, where meaning is co-constructed through experience rather than transmitted through instruction.

Teachers' responses support this perspective. They acknowledged that students' interest in everyday topics can serve as a gateway to deeper cultural discussion. However, they also warned that without pedagogical mediation, such interest risks remaining at a surface level of cultural curiosity rather than developing into critical cultural reflections. This aligns with Byram's distinction between "cultural awareness" (recognition of differences) and "intercultural competence" (critical engagement with those differences).

Consequently, teachers play a crucial mediational role in translating students' affective engagement into analytical reflection. Through guided comparison activities (e.g., contrasting politeness strategies between Japanese and Indonesian contexts), instructors can help learners develop the metacultural insight necessary to function across cultures. In Vygotskian terms, teachers act as cultural scaffolds, enabling students to transform their experiential learning into conceptual understanding. This collaborative learning environment parallels the findings from interactive EFL classrooms in Indonesia, where cooperative tasks significantly enhance both language proficiency and intercultural awareness (Arafah et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2025).

H. *Toward an Intercultural-Oriented Textbook Design*

Both students and teachers articulated a shared aspiration for textbooks that embodied an intercultural orientation—not merely describing Japanese culture, but facilitating cross-cultural dialogue. This implies a shift from teaching culture as content to teaching it as a process.

Students' suggestions for visuals, QR-linked videos, and cross-cultural comparisons signal a readiness for multimodal and reflective learning. Teachers, in turn, recommended integrating reflective prompts that encourage students to analyze cultural meanings and relate them to their own experiences.

This mutual aspiration aligns with Deardorff's (2006) framework of intercultural competence development, which progresses from attitudes (curiosity and openness) to knowledge (cultural self-awareness and understanding) and finally to internal outcomes (adaptability and empathy). Hence, textbooks for Indonesian learners of Japanese should be designed to facilitate movement along this continuum through dialogic tasks, reflective questions, and comparative activities that nurture intercultural thinking.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined how students and teachers in Japanese language programs at Indonesian universities perceive the cultural representations embedded in major textbooks such as *Marugoto* and *Minna no Nihongo*, and how these perceptions shape the need for an intercultural-oriented learning design.

The findings revealed a strong consensus that language and culture are inseparable, yet they also uncovered a pedagogical imbalance between grammatical precision and cultural contextualization. While *Minna no Nihongo* provides structural clarity, *Marugoto* offers a communicative and culture-rich learning experience. However, both remain limited in addressing deep cultural reflection, that is, helping learners relate Japanese culture to their own lived experiences.

Students emphasized the need for authentic, visual, and interactive materials that mirror real-life communication in Japan and promote student engagement. In contrast, teachers underlined the importance of pedagogical mediation, ensuring that cultural content fosters reflection rather than superficial familiarity. These complementary perspectives highlight the potential of an integrated curriculum that combines structural learning with intercultural awareness.

The proposed 4P + IC framework (Product–Practice–Perspective–Person + Intercultural Competence) encapsulates this synthesis. It advocates a textbook design that goes beyond describing cultural facts to facilitate dialogue, comparison, and reflection—helping learners become not only proficient speakers but also interculturally competent individuals capable of navigating Japanese and Indonesian sociocultural contexts with sensitivity and understanding.

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