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Analysis of Cultural Teaching Approaches in Japanese Language Textbooks and Exercises: A Case Study of the Beginner and Pre-Intermediate Levels (A1 and A2) of the Manabō Nihongo Series

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study was conducted to analyze the cultural content of the *"Manabō Nihongo"* textbook and to determine its effectiveness in fostering intercultural competence.

Method: The theoretical framework combines Edward Hall's cultural layers model—with an emphasis on the distinction between visible and hidden culture—and Byram's model of intercultural competence, which includes five components: intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The research method focused on a qualitative content analysis of the textbook's lessons. By examining the cultural content and instructional activities, the strengths and weaknesses of the book in developing intercultural skills were identified.

Results: Findings revealed that the textbook performs well in presenting visible cultural knowledge, including customs, foods, and everyday situations. However, there is a notable gap in fostering the other components of intercultural competence.

Conclusions: The main shortcomings include the lack of comparative cultural exercises, the absence of interactive activities such as role-playing and real-life simulations, and insufficient attention to cultivating curiosity and openness toward other cultures. Moreover, even when the book addresses deep cultural concepts—such as honorific and humble speech or indirect expressions of inconvenience—it remains largely grammar-focused and descriptive, avoiding deeper exploration of underlying cultural values and meanings. Overall, the book's approach is primarily informational and descriptive, lacking a purposeful framework for transforming cultural information into intercultural competence. The findings indicate that revising the design of instructional activities—emphasizing active interaction, cultural comparison, and the enhancement of critical thinking—is essential for improving cultural education and developing intercultural skills.

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language today is not limited only to mastering grammar and the four skills; rather, it requires the development of intercultural abilities and an understanding of the sociocultural contexts of the language. Research has shown that without cultural awareness, even structurally proficient language learners become weak in real-life situations and lose the ability to convey meaning (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998). In fact, language proficiency without cultural awareness can turn into "useless linguistic knowledge" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The importance of this matter is twofold in Japanese language education, as the choice of vocabulary, the degree of politeness (*reigi*), and grammatical structures are a reflection of social values such as hierarchy and respect (Haugh, 2004). The correct use of linguistic politeness levels—such as *sonkeigo* (honorific), *kenjōgo* (humble), and *teineigo* (polite)—is not an optional strategy, but rather a reflection of the speaker's understanding of their own and the interlocutor's social position (Ide, 1989).

Studies in applied linguistics have shown that one of the main reasons for "communication breakdown" among language learners is a lack of cultural understanding; even with the precise application of grammar, ignoring the sociocultural context can lead to misunderstandings or unintentional disrespect (Thomas, 1983). Baker (2015) also emphasizes the importance of "intercultural competence" and believes that a language learner reaches a desirable level of communicative competence only when they are able to interpret and understand diverse cultural perspectives.

A review of Japanese language educational resources reveals that many of them still do not systematically and purposefully engage in cultural instruction and primarily focus on language skills. This can lead to superficial and inefficient learning and challenge learners in the actual use of the language. The *Manabō Nihongo* series is an appropriate example for analyzing cultural content and examining the representation of culture in Japanese language education. The approach that considers language merely as a medium for transmitting culture—although it has become the dominant paradigm in language teaching and has extensive theoretical foundations—has serious limitations in developing intercultural competence. Research studies show that successful foreign language learning requires the development of "intercultural competence" (Byram, 1997; Baker, 2015) and that every conversation is regarded as a "cultural act" (Kramsch, 1998). Deep understanding of the language, such as comprehending the expression "*itadakimasu*" (an expression of gratitude before eating any meal or snack) in Japanese, is possible only through awareness of fundamental cultural values. The importance of cultural dimension in Japanese language education becomes even more evident in countries such as Iran, which have profound cultural differences with Japan. Although many resources

are successful in conveying language skills, they often have shortcomings in systematic presentation of cultural elements and fostering intercultural competence, a deficiency more frequently observed in formal classrooms. Studies in the field of textbook content analysis have also shown that educational resources may always have imbalanced representations. For example, Dahmardeh and Muhammadi (2023) showed in their examination of Iranian English-language textbooks that, in the newly authored books, gender balance was not observed, with male presence dominating names, characters, images, and texts. This finding shows that textbooks may operate in a limited and biased manner not only in transmitting language skills but also in representing cultural and social dimensions (including gender). Therefore, examining the *Manabō Nihongo* series from the perspective of cultural representation gains double importance.

The innovation of the present study lies in its focus on the position and method of cultural representation in the *Manabō Nihongo* series, which both identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing resources, provides practical solutions for improving the design of resources, and responds to the need for localized research in Japanese language education. This study was designed with the aim of examining the place of culture in the *Manabō Nihongo* instructional series and it emphasizes the importance of integrating language and culture teaching. The study attempts to make clear how and to what extent Japanese language educational resources succeed in developing learners' intercultural competence. The research questions are as follows: What approaches has the *Manabō Nihongo* series adopted in teaching culture, and to what extent has it been able to establish a balance between the teaching of language and culture? In what ways have cultural elements—both visible (tangible) and invisible (intangible)—been represented in the texts and exercises of this series? And to what extent is the cultural representation in this series effective in fostering learners' intercultural competence?

Based on the review of theories and previous studies, the research hypotheses are as follows: the *Manabō Nihongo* series primarily focuses on presenting descriptive information about culture, with interactive or analytical approaches being less utilized; visible culture—such as customs and rituals— has greater prominence than invisible culture, such as values and attitudes; and the lack of a systematic framework for cultural instruction limits the series' ability to foster intercultural competence and may lead to pragmatic failure. Overall, cultural representation in this series is mainly descriptive and limited to visible culture, with less attention paid to deeper cultural dimensions, which underscores the necessity of the systematic integration of culture into language teaching and its importance for achieving effective and meaningful communication (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Given the profound cultural

differences between Iran and Japan and the fact that Iranian language learners are not placed within a fully immersive context of the target culture, identifying the shortcomings of existing educational resources is of high practical importance. The findings of this study can provide the Japanese language teaching community in Iran—especially teachers and instructional designers—with tangible strategies to compensate for these gaps through the design of complementary activities, increasing awareness of visible culture, and facilitating intercultural interactions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the following three main components:

2.1.1 Intercultural Competence

Byram's Model (1997) is one of the most comprehensive frameworks for explaining the dimensions of Intercultural Competence. Intercultural competence, which is defined as effective and appropriate interaction with individuals from other cultures, consists of five key components, each introduced by the French term *"savoir"*:

1. **Intercultural attitudes (savoir être)**

The disposition to suspend cultural judgments, possessing curiosity and an open mind, respecting differences, and the ability to preserve one's connection to the native culture while paying attention to the other culture.

2. **Knowledge (savoirs)**

Awareness of societies, institutions, cultural artifacts, and beliefs—both within one's own culture and that of the interlocutor.

3. **Skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)**

The ability to identify, describe, and relate cultural events or documents from another culture to the values and experiences of one's native culture.

4. **Skills of discovery and interaction, practical ability (savoir apprendre / faire)**

The ability to develop a deeper awareness of cultures and to apply knowledge, skills, and intercultural attitudes in real interactions.

5. **Critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager)**

The ability to critically analyze and evaluate different cultures based on multiple criteria and diverse perspectives.

This model demonstrates that language learning is not limited merely to acquiring language skills; rather, it must also cultivate the ability to understand, interpret, and analyze cultural contexts and intercultural interaction.

2.1.2 Language as a Cultural practice

Kramsch (2006) views language not only as a communicational tool but also as a cultural and social practice. Every linguistic interaction occurs within a specific cultural context, and meaning is formed only within the cultural framework. One of Kramsch's key concepts is the *"Third Place"*; this concept refers to the situation in which a language learner constructs a new intercultural identity between their native culture and the target culture. In this intermediary space, the individual is able to combine cultural elements from both worlds, produce new meanings, and experience diverse interactional styles. From this perspective, language education goes beyond the mere transmission of information and must also cultivate the ability to produce meaning, flexibility in intercultural situations, and an understanding of cultural complexities.

2.1.3 Approaches to Teaching Culture

In the field of language education, various approaches exist for integrating the cultural component into the curriculum. One influential framework is Hanvey's Model of Intercultural Awareness (1976), which introduces consecutive levels of culture recognition:

1. **Awareness of superficial and visible cultural traits:** Symbols, customs, behaviors, and outward features that are usually identifiable through direct observation or general resources.
2. **Awareness of important and subtle cultural traits and their contrasts with one's own culture:** Recognition of values and patterns that differ from personal experience and might be confusing.
3. **Rational and cognitive understanding of cultural differences:** The ability to analyze and comprehend different cultural characteristics in a way that is believable to the individual and they can understand the differences from a rational and critical viewpoint.
4. **Empathic and internal experience of another culture:** A deep awareness of the other culture that is achieved through living within that culture or extensive interaction with its members and the individual can tangibly understand the perspective and worldview of others.

2.1.3.1 Integrating Language and Culture in Education

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) emphasize that language and culture are inseparable; every linguistic action always finds meaning within a cultural context. Language education is not sufficient merely through providing information about the target culture; rather, an interactive and analytical process must be provided that engages the language learner in interpreting and critically rethinking intercultural experiences. The ultimate goal of intercultural language education is to cultivate the learner's ability for appropriate and meaningful action in

intercultural situations, in a way that they can understand, analyze, and flexibly manage the differences. Hall (1976) considers culture to be multilayered and distinguishes between visible sections (such as food, clothing, and rituals) and invisible sections (such as values, norms, and perceptual patterns). Sole focus on visible elements of language education only results in superficial understanding. Education must also pay attention to the invisible layers so that the ability for real interaction with other cultures can be developed. Kramsch (1993) also believes that culture education in language classes is often limited to the superficial level. To achieve real "intercultural competence," it is necessary that education also address the invisible and analytical layers of culture and that the groundwork be provided for fostering critical perspective, the skill of interpreting differences, and the ability for effective intercultural interaction.

2.2 Analytical Framework of the Present Study

The analytical framework of the present study is based on two main pillars:

1. **Byram's Model of Intercultural Competence (1997):** This model with its five components—attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness—provides a comprehensive tool for examining the development of intercultural competence in language education. The present study uses this model to analyze the degree of attention the *Manabō Nihongo* series pays to different dimensions of intercultural competence and the quality of their representation in the texts and exercises.

2. **The Distinction between Visible and Invisible Layers of Culture (Kramsch, 1993; Hall, 1976, 1989):** This distinction makes it possible to categorize the cultural elements within the textbook in terms of being superficial or deep. Also, it is possible to examine the degree to which the series pays attention to the visible and fundamental dimensions of culture. visible culture includes customs, practices, symbols, and observable artifacts, while invisible culture refers to fundamental values, attitudes, norms, and worldviews.

2.3 Previous Studies

In this section, first global achievements and approaches in culture education will be examined, and then studies related to Japanese language education and the representation of culture in these resources will be analyzed.

2.3.1 Global Studies

In the field of foreign language education, studies have shown that merely transmitting cultural information or introducing national stereotypes is not sufficient for developing intercultural competence. From the 1980s onwards, approaches have shifted from the traditional view—which saw culture primarily as knowledge related to history, art, social institutions, and

symbols (Kramsch, 1993)—toward an understanding of culture as everyday practice and intercultural interaction (Byram, 1997). In this theoretical shift, the language learner is considered not only a recipient of information, but also an active agent in the process of cultural meaning-making.

Important theoretical models, such as Byram's Model of Intercultural Competence (1997) and Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (2017), have played key roles in this transition. Byram introduces five components of intercultural competence—attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness—and believes that language education is incomplete without attention to these components. On the other hand, the DMIS model shows that language learners, when encountering cultural differences, pass through sequential stages from "denial" and "defense" to "adaptation" and "integration." Therefore, educational resources must provide the possibility for gradual movement along this path (Bennett, 2017).

Educational studies show that culture education should not be limited to the transmission of information and customs. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) state that effective culture education goes beyond "cultural facts" and includes the analysis of cultural situations, intercultural comparison, role-playing, using authentic texts, and the creation of opportunities for dialogue and reflection in order to foster cultural awareness and sensitivity. Holliday (2011) warns that reducing culture to superficial and fixed differences does not strengthen intercultural competence. This approach even leads to the formation of stereotypical and confrontational attitudes toward the cultural other and ignores individual behaviors and differences. This perspective can create *othering* and reinforce misconceptions and moral judgments toward non-Western cultures. Holliday emphasizes the necessity of a critical cosmopolitan approach that views culture as a complex, fluid, and negotiable process and provides the possibility for intercultural interaction beyond national and ideological borders. In this regard, Baker (2011, 2015) suggests that language education should provide a platform for "intercultural dialogue," where language learners can analyze and reflect on diverse cultural perspectives. He emphasizes the importance of using authentic texts, multimedia resources, and real interaction situations—such as student exchanges or international online classes. The findings of these studies show that language learning will be deep and sustainable when the language learner links their own cultural experiences with other perspectives and engages in reflection in a critical position. A synthesis of global studies shows that culture education in widely used languages, such as English and French, has increasingly moved from "cultural information" toward "intercultural interaction." This trend has special importance for the present study, and comparing it with the status of Japanese resources can provide a clearer picture.

2.3.2 Studies Related to the Japanese Language

Based on previous research, the representation of culture in Japanese language teaching materials and the integration of language instruction with cultural content play a significant role in fostering cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Ciubăncan (2022) demonstrated that self-introduction sections featuring Japanese and non-Japanese characters in Japanese textbooks have progressed from simple, culturally stereotypical depictions to more advanced and semi-interactive intercultural format. In earlier decades, foreign characters were mainly Americans and portrayed stereotypically, but with the advent of resources such as *Erin's Challenge* and *Marugoto*, cultural interactions have become more natural and multilayered, allowing for flexibility and adaptability in cultural situations. The range of nationalities represented has also increased, and as the target audience shifted from school and university students to adults, the quality of cultural interactions has improved. These changes indicate that representation of culture in educational materials is not merely limited to superficial information but rather, it provides a platform for direct experience with cultural interactions and the growth of intercultural competence.

Integrating language teaching with content—especially through literary texts and authentic resources—can effectively foster learners' intercultural competence (Maruki, 2020). A review of the CLIL method in Japanese language teaching at U.S. universities indicated that simultaneous study of Japanese language and literature within an authentic and contemporary framework, in addition to strengthening language skills, enhances the ability to perform cultural analysis and understand different cultural perspectives. These findings demonstrate that teaching culture merely through the presentation of surface-level information is insufficient and requires the practice of self-reflection, critical analysis, and engagement with authentic texts. Combining learner-centered activities with real cultural resources provides the opportunity for the growth of a multi-layered understanding of the target culture.

This approach aligns with Bennett's stages of intercultural competence development (DMIS) and the NCSSFL-ACTFL standards, which emphasizes the learner's movement from superficial and stereotypical perceptions toward a more complex and flexible cultural understanding. Furthermore, Mahoney's (2007) study shows that non-native Japanese teachers (NNS) often present culture integrated with language teaching and utilize student-centered methods based on their prior experiences. Mahoney emphasizes the importance of creating a "Third Place"; a space where learners can interact between their own culture and the target culture and develop their intercultural competence. Successful teachers in fostering intercultural competence use strategies such as encouraging cultural comparison, representing different values and attitudes, and creating dialogue spaces for the exchange of viewpoints.

Despite advancements, limitations are still observed in the representation of culture within Japanese educational resources. Many textbooks focus on visible dimensions of culture—such as customs and practices—while paying less attention to more hidden aspects like values, attitudes, and perceptual patterns. Even resources that address intercultural interaction are often superficial and pre-controlled, not providing opportunities for critical reflection or the experience of the "Third Place." Therefore, the integration of culture and language in Japanese language teaching is still in a transitional phase and requires deeper and more systematic analyses, which highlights the necessity of examining series such as *Manabō Nihongo*. A review of global literature shows that language teaching has moved from the transmission of superficial information toward the development of intercultural competence. In this transition, models such as Byram's Intercultural Competence and Bennett's Intercultural Sensitivity have played important roles. Studies related to the Japanese language suggest that although the representation of culture in the resources of this language has advanced, limitations still exist in focusing on the invisible dimensions of culture and providing opportunities for critical reflection. This gap between global approaches and the current situation justifies the need for a precise analysis of *Manabō Nihongo* and an examination of its ability to foster intercultural competence.

3. Research Method

The present study is qualitative in its approach and descriptive-analytical in its objective, and it examines the position of culture in Japanese language educational resources. Its aim is to analyze the approaches to teaching culture in the texts and exercises of the *Manabō Nihongo* series. The qualitative method allows the researcher to precisely and thoroughly examine the explicit and implicit dimensions of culture as well as the ways in which learners' intercultural competence is fostered, with attention to the cultural context and educational content. This study also focuses on analyzing the methods of cultural education in Japanese language educational resources, and for this purpose, the *Manabō Nihongo* series was selected as the case study sample. This 6-volume series covers Japanese language from the elementary to advanced levels, among which the first three volumes corresponding to elementary levels (2 volumes) and pre-intermediate (1 volume), equivalent to A1 and A2, were examined. The reason for selecting these three volumes is due to their widespread use in Japanese language classes at the University of Tehran and the progression of the majority of learners to these levels. Therefore, analyzing these three volumes can provide a comprehensive and realistic picture of how culture is represented and taught at the elementary and pre-intermediate stages. In this study, all main texts (dialogues, reading passages, exercises, and activities) as well as the visual elements of

the books were thoroughly examined and analyzed. This comprehensive selection allows for a multilayered analysis of cultural representation.

In the data collection phase, all sections of the textbooks were systematically extracted. Each lesson was considered an independent section, and within it, every text, exercise, or image was classified as a *meaning unit*. To identify cultural elements, two theoretical frameworks were employed: Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence and the distinction between visible and invisible culture (Kramsch, 1993; Hall, 1976). The data analysis was conducted through several consecutive stages:

1. **Identification of cultural elements:** In this stage, all texts and exercises were examined from the perspective of cultural indicators. For example, the use of various forms of politeness (*keigo*), social rituals (such as congratulating, farewell, or expressions of gratitude), or specific cultural concepts were recorded.
2. **Initial coding:** The identified elements were coded based on the two axes of "visible/invisible culture" and "components of Byram's model."
3. **Thematic classification:** The initial codes were categorized into broader themes to reveal the general patterns of cultural representation within the series.
4. **Interpretation and analysis:** At this stage, the emphasis was on answering the main research questions, including: to what extent has the series managed to balance language and cultural education? And have the cultural elements merely been presented as information or have opportunities for reflection and intercultural interaction also been provided?

To ensure objectivity and credibility in the qualitative coding process, a structured coding guide was used that converted each component of the theoretical frameworks (Byram, and Hall/Kramsch) into objective and identifiable indicators within the text. The results obtained from this coding are systematically summarized in Tables 1 to 6.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results of Examining and Analyzing the First Volume

Each volume of this series contains 20 lessons; regarding the arrangement of the lessons and exercises in the first two volumes of this series, Azarparand states that each lesson, without exception, is presented within eight pages, and in each lesson, between 3 to 4 formulaic expressions are taught. These eight pages, up to the end of the fortieth lesson mostly follow a consistent structure composed of five sections: "Introduction to the Lesson," "Formulaic Expressions," "Exercises," "Dialogue," and "Substitution/Reading Comprehension Exercises," as well as "Listening and Speaking." (Azarparand, 2019, p. 28) The analysis of these sections in the lessons of the first volume showed that the cultural content of the textbook has remained primarily at the level of *visible culture*. In the introductory lessons (1 to 3), the main focus was

on introducing public places, time, food, and shopping. These cultural elements enable learners to communicate in simple, everyday situations, however at the same time their content is merely descriptive and does not address hidden cultural categories or cross-cultural comparison. In the following lessons, a similar pattern was repeated; For example, in lesson 5 the topic of transportation is introduced, and in lesson 6 learners become familiar with expressing their wants, but in none of these cases is an opportunity provided for reflection on cultural values or norms. In some lessons, signs of attention to invisible culture were observed, but these cases were limited and non-systematic. As an example, in lesson 4, the role-play activities allow learners to express their requests in a polite tone; this reflects the importance of indirect politeness in the target culture. In lesson 7, gift-giving and social occasions are introduced, which can be considered an indication of cultural values related to social relationships. Similarly, in lesson 9 reference is made to purposefulness and the importance of individual planning, which may carry part of the invisible culture. However, these elements are not explicitly explained and the learner is only exposed to language examples.

These findings can be compared with existing theoretical frameworks. Based on Hall's and Kramsch's classifications, the first volume clearly prioritizes *visible culture* and incorporates *invisible culture* only implicitly and dispersedly. The information provided mostly remains at a cognitive level and does not go beyond the level of interpretation or analysis. Similarly, within Byram's framework, the same pattern is evident: the "knowledge" dimension is thoroughly covered across all lessons, whereas other dimensions such as "skills of interpreting and relating" and "critical cultural awareness" are either very weak (as in lessons 4 and 7) or completely absent (as in lessons 1 to 3 and 5 to 6). The intercultural attitude also remains mostly neutral, and the learner rarely encounters situations that would prompt intercultural empathy or comparison. From the perspective of the reasons for this situation, it should be noted that the first volume is designed for level A1. It is natural that at this level the main focus of the authors is on teaching basic vocabulary, simple grammar, and everyday situations. In this textbook, culture is also used more as a means to create a cultural context for instructional content rather than as an independent goal aimed for developing intercultural competence. Although this approach is effective for functional language learning, in practice it leads to the formation of a superficial understanding of the target culture. By the end of the first volume, the learner is able to reproduce the cultural expressions and patterns presented, but does not gain much skill in interpreting cultural differences or reflecting critically on them.

The analysis of the first volume of *Manabō Nihongo* clearly shows that the dominant approach at this level is "language learning with cultural contextualization" rather than "active development of intercultural competence." The book's main strength lies in its effective

presentation of visible cultural knowledge (such as basic etiquette, foods, places, and everyday situations), which is essential and practical for an A1 learner. However, the greatest weakness of the book is the absence of a systematic framework for addressing invisible culture and the more complex components of intercultural competence. Elements of invisible culture are, at best, presented implicitly, scattered, and without interpretive support, and the textbook has missed numerous opportunities for cultural comparison, critical reflection, or meaningful interaction. Within Byram's framework, the book's focus is almost entirely on the "knowledge" component, while the other components are severely neglected. Overall, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis of the present study; meaning that the textbook is more focused on transferring visible and descriptive cultural information than on developing intercultural competence. This conclusion has a clear implication for language teachers: they must fill the existing gap in the book through supplementary activities (such as comparative discussions, cultural projects, or critical exercises). Also, this finding indicates to the authors the necessity of revision; so that in higher levels or later editions, greater share is dedicated to invisible culture, interactive skills, and the development of critical cultural awareness, in order to guide the path of language teaching toward the genuine development of intercultural competence.

Table 1. Representation of Cultural Elements in Lessons 1–10 of *Manabō Nihongo* (Volume 1)

Lessons	Culture (Visible / Invisible)	Overall Analysis
1	Public places (station, store), times of day, basic verbs	Visible / Knowledge
2	Family members and family relationships	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Partial Attitude
3	Everyday foods and drinks	Visible / Knowledge
4	Shopping, numbers, prices / indirect politeness	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Partial Interaction
5	Daily activities (work, leisure)	Visible / Knowledge
6	Places and directions	Visible / Knowledge
7	Occasions and gifts / social value of gift-giving	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Attitude
8	School and daily schedule / respect for the teacher's role	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Partial Attitude
9	Travel and transportation / goal orientation and importance of planning	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Partial Attitude
10	Holidays and leisure / collectivism in group activities	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Attitude

In continuation, lessons 11 to 20 of the first volume also follow the same fixed structural pattern; that is, each lesson is presented in the format of eight pages and in five sections: "Introduction to the Lesson," "Formulaic Expressions," "Exercise," "Dialogue," and "Substitution Exercise and Reading Comprehension/Conversation." The analysis of these sections in the second half of the first volume revealed that the focus of cultural content still remained on visible elements and little effort has been made to enter systematically into the invisible layers of culture. In lessons 11 and 12, everyday situations such as recreational activities, shopping, and introducing household objects are presented. These topics remain at the level of surface culture and are merely limited to transmitting practical vocabulary and expressions. Lesson thirteen, centered on daily schedules and the use of calendars, reflects orderliness and time orientation in Japanese culture, but these aspects are presented implicitly and without cultural interpretation. In lessons fourteen to sixteen, topics such as illness, visiting the doctor, and using medication are introduced, which contain important cultural potentials (such as the status of the doctor and the manner of patient–doctor interaction); Nevertheless, these potentials remain only at the level of lexical representation, and no opportunity is provided for cross-cultural comparison or critical reflection.

In lessons 17 and 18, the focus is on travel experiences and group recreational activities. Here, one can detect traces of cultural values such as collectivism and social harmony; however, these elements are again not explicitly discussed. In lesson 19, language functions related to expressing emotions and internal states are introduced, yet this section also emphasizes the descriptive level of language rather than the understanding or interpretation of cultural differences. Finally, in Lesson 20, through the introduction of transitive and intransitive verbs and their use in real-life situations such as losing items and visiting a police station, a part of Japanese public service culture and social order is implicitly reflected. Although this topic could have provided a basis for strengthening intercultural competence, in practice it is presented merely in the form of language examples and no deep cultural explanation or analysis is carried out. This pattern is also confirmed within Hall's and Kramsch's theoretical frameworks: visible culture clearly takes priority, and invisible elements, if mentioned at all, are scattered and non-systematic. Within Byram's framework, the same trend of the first volume persists: the "knowledge" dimension is thoroughly covered, but other dimensions such as "skills of interpreting and relating," "intercultural attitudes," and especially "critical cultural awareness" are very weak or absent. As a result, although learners make progress in language knowledge, in the field of intercultural competence they remain subject to the same limitations found in the first half of the volume.

Overall, the analysis of lessons 11 to 20 demonstrates that the first volume of the textbook is entirely designed to serve the goals of level A1: that is, meeting primary communicative needs in simple, everyday situations. Culture at this level plays more the role of contextualization and is not pursued as an independent educational objective. This approach is justifiable from the perspective of basic language instruction, but from the viewpoint of developing intercultural competence it leads to a superficial and descriptive understanding of the target culture.

Table 2. Representation of Cultural Elements in Lessons 11–20 of *Manabō Nihongo* (Volume 1)

Lessons	Culture (Visible / Invisible)	Overall Analysis
11	Daily activities, leisure time	Visible / Knowledge
12	Household items and shopping for goods	Visible / Knowledge
13	Scheduling, calendar, daily routines / social order and the value of time	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Attitude
14	Illness, visiting the doctor / respect for the medical profession and social hierarchy	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Partial Attitude
15	Medicine, prescriptions, instructions / respect for expert authority	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge
16	Emergency situations / cooperation and collective responsibility	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Limited Interaction
17	Travel and sightseeing / value of collectivism and group harmony	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Attitude
18	Group recreational activities / social harmony and group participation	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Partial Attitude
19	Emotions and internal states / indirect politeness	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Attitude
20	Losing items, going to the police station / social order and adherence to social norms	Visible + Limited Invisible / Knowledge + Partial Attitude

4.2. Results of Examining and Analyzing the Second Volume

Volume two of the series includes twenty lessons (21 to 40). In lessons 21 to 25, the main focus of instruction is on strengthening more complex language structures and practical vocabulary for expressing abilities, requesting help, describing experiences, and performing daily activities. These lessons introduce everyday situations such as personal activities, interactions with others, and public environments, but little attention is given to cultural values, norms, or cross-cultural differences. For example, in lesson 24, the focus was on shopping and

daily planning; the learner becomes familiar with practical vocabulary and sentences, but no opportunity is provided for analyzing social behavior, group interaction, or cross-cultural comparison. Lessons 26 and 27, through introducing the structures *~tekuru / ~teiku* and *~temiru / ~teoku / ~teshimau*, enable the learner to express attitudes and practical experiences. These structures reflect the importance of consideration, preparation, and experience in Japanese culture, but again the instruction is mostly descriptive and exercise-based, and the activities provide little opportunity for practicing interactional skills or critical reflection. Lessons 28 and 29 focus on teaching conditional structures, expressing sensory perceptions, and goal setting. These lessons implicitly provide the possibility of reflecting cultural values such as cooperation, frugality, and attention to health, and social harmony, However, similar to the previous lessons, the exercises are limited to sentence production and translation, with no emphasis on real cross-cultural interaction. Lesson 30, with a focus on the passive structure, provides an example of addressing the hidden layers of culture. Through using these structures, the learner learns how to express discomfort or the impact of others' actions in an indirect manner. This lesson is more successful than the others in showing the invisible dimensions of culture, yet its exercises still remain mostly practical and descriptive rather than critical reflection or real cross-cultural role-play.

With the entrance to the A2 level in volume two, the textbook takes a significant step toward introducing more complex grammatical structures that carry substantial cultural weight. The new strength of this volume is its provision of language frameworks for expressing invisible culture (such as politeness, indirectness, and the maintenance of social harmony) through structures like the passive, giving and receiving verbs, and polite forms. Nevertheless, the greatest contradiction of the book becomes apparent here: despite having access to richer cultural content, the instructional approach of the textbook still remains descriptive and grammar-oriented. The book teaches these deep cultural concepts merely as new "grammatical rules" and neglects exploring the values and social meanings embedded in them. The analysis of lessons 21 to 30 in the continuation of this volume clearly demonstrates that the textbook remains in service of the goals of the A2 level for strengthening communication skills and presenting visible culture as a background for language learning. Within Hall's and Kramsch's theoretical framework, volume two also clearly places the main focus on visible culture, and invisible culture is presented only in a scattered and limited manner. In Byram's framework, as well, the same pattern of the first volume continues: the "knowledge" dimension is fully covered, but the essential dimensions of "skills of interpreting and relating," "intercultural attitudes," and "critical cultural awareness" are either weak or completely absent. As a result, the gap between "language–cultural knowledge" and "intercultural competence" not only fails

to narrow but actually deepens as the material becomes more complex. This situation indicates the heightened necessity of supplementary activities for teachers and the need for fundamental revision for the authors in future editions.

Table 3. Representation of Cultural Elements in Lessons 21–30 of *Manabō Nihongo*, Volume II

Lessons	Culture (Visible / Invisible)	Overall Analysis
21	Structures for expressing reasons, disagreement, topic restriction; indirect communication, politeness, collectivism, precision	Visible + Limited Invisible
22	Ability and sensory perception structures; work culture, value of improvement, naturalism, nostalgia	Visible + Invisible
23	Structures for expressing intention and plans; future orientation, planning, family and marriage values, harmony	Visible + Strong Invisible
24	Structures for inference, determination, and change of state; indirectness, self-improvement, effort, consideration	Visible + Strong Invisible
25	Direct command and prohibition structures; strong hierarchy, avoidance of confrontation	Visible
26	Structures for movement toward/from the speaker; communication, initiative, continuity, harmony	Visible + Invisible
27	Structures of experience, completion, and preparation; curiosity, planning, responsibility, hospitality	Visible + Invisible
28	Conditional and proportional structures; offering help, frugality, flexibility, causal thinking	Visible + Invisible
29	Structures of appearance, purpose, and excessiveness; attention to health, goal orientation, moderation, empathy	Visible + Invisible
30	Passive structures (three types); indirect communication, maintenance of harmony, social sensitivity	Visible + Very Strong Invisible

Lessons 31 to 40 likewise follow the same pattern of Volume One and the first part of Volume Two: presentation in the form of eight pages, focus on teaching grammatical structures and practical vocabulary, and the use of culture mainly as context (contextualization) for communicative situations. In Lessons 31 to 35, structures such as *～to*, *～tara*, *～temo*, *～ba*, and *～noni* are introduced, which make it possible to express condition, assumption, and contrast. These items help learners formulate more complex situations such as future planning, describing probable conditions, or expressing problems and obstacles. Although these structures have a high capacity for reflecting invisible cultural elements such as flexibility, future orientation, and the value of patience, the main focus in the book remains on language exercises, and little opportunity is provided for cross-cultural comparison or critical analysis. In lessons 36 to 40, topics such as expressing intention and purpose, making more polite

requests, narrating past events, and expressing personal feelings and judgments are presented. In this section, clearer signs of invisible culture can be found, especially in indirect speech, the importance of group harmony, higher levels of language politeness, and narration within the framework of social relationships. For example, in Lesson 37, indirect requests are a reflection of the value of politeness and avoiding direct confrontation in Japanese culture. Similarly, lesson 39, which deals with expressing emotions and judgments, has a good potential for entering cross-cultural discussions, but in practice still remains at a descriptive and lexical level.

Within Hall's and Kramsch's framework, in these ten lessons visible culture remains dominant and invisible culture appears only in limited and scattered instances (such as lessons 37 and 40). In Byram's framework as well, the "knowledge" dimension is well covered, but the dimensions of "interpreting and relating," "attitude," and especially "critical cultural awareness" still remain weak or absent. Overall, the analysis of lessons 31 to 40 shows that the second volume of *Manabō Nihongo,* despite introducing more complex grammatical structures (A2 level), still remains limited in terms of developing intercultural competence and relies primarily on the transmission of visible culture and practical language instruction.

Table 4. Representation of Cultural Elements in Lessons 31–40 of *Manabō Nihongo*, Volume II

Lessons	Culture (Visible / Invisible)	Overall Analysis
31	UNESCO World Heritage, national products, traditional processes; national pride, global outlook, attention to process	Visible + Invisible
32	Reporting others' statements, information sources, travel and gift-giving culture; avoidance of certainty, indirectness, attention to sources	Visible + Invisible
33	Expressing guesses and probability, work environment, rumors; avoidance of certainty, information hierarchy, logical reasoning	Visible + Invisible
34	Nominalization, expressing individual and group decisions, work environment; individualism vs. collectivism, flexibility, commitment	Visible + Strong Invisible
35	Giving and receiving verbs; strong hierarchy, humility, group boundaries	Visible + Very Strong Invisible
36	Polite expressions; hierarchy, deep politeness, maintenance of harmony	Visible + Very Strong Invisible
37	Humble and modest expressions; humility as a key value, preservation of social face	Visible + Very Strong Invisible
38	Compound verbs, sequencing events, social situations; accuracy in expression, attention to process, contextualization	Visible + Invisible
39	Causative structures (obligation/permission), hierarchical relationships; hierarchy, indirect politeness, emotion control	Visible + Very Strong Invisible

Lessons	Culture (Visible / Invisible)	Overall Analysis
40	Causative-passive structures (being forced), social pressures; collectivism, conformity, indirect expression of dissatisfaction	Visible + Very Strong Invisible

4.3. Results of Examining and Analyzing the Third Volume

The analysis of the first ten lessons of the pre-intermediate volume of *Manabō Nihongo* shows that this book, despite introducing more complex communicative situations and addressing deeper social topics, still relies on the same pattern of the previous volumes, namely an emphasis on transmitting cultural information in a descriptive and mostly one-directional manner. Although the quantity and depth of invisible cultural elements have noticeably increased compared to the elementary level, the process of transforming this "knowledge" into "intercultural competence" is still neglected.

In Lessons 1 to 4, the textbook succeeds in effectively integrating invisible culture within authentic communicative situations. Polite requests to the teacher (Lesson 1), requesting leave from a superior (Lesson 2), expressing deep gratitude (Lesson 3), and managing conflict and refusing requests (Lesson 4) all provide a rich context for demonstrating values such as role-based politeness, indirectness, maintenance of harmony and conformity, and responsibility. However, the textbook's approach to this rich content remains "pattern-based instruction," focusing on accurate production of example sentences rather than cultivating interpretation and analytical skills.

In Lessons 5 to 10, the focus slightly shifts from intensive interpersonal situations toward more descriptive topics (country comparisons, event reports, and introducing people). In these lessons, visible culture prevails over invisible culture, and the textbook overlooks golden opportunities for intercultural discussion. For instance, Lesson 10, which introduces characters using gender-based stereotypes, represents a clear case of "missed opportunity"; a topic that inherently requires critical discussion, but is presented as an ordinary and unquestionable "fact." Within Hall's and Kramsch's framework, it can be seen that although signs of hidden culture become more prominent in lessons related to social interactions (especially lessons 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8), these elements are presented "automatically", without providing learners with opportunities to explore them. In Byram's framework as well, the main gap becomes clear: the "knowledge" dimension is well covered, but the dimensions of "interpreting and relating," "attitude," and especially "critical cultural awareness" are either entirely absent or appear only inconsiderably and coincidentally.

In summary, the pre-intermediate volume of *Manabō Nihongo* takes a step forward in providing rich and authentic cultural content. but it stops short of the next step: transforming this content into a tool for developing a critical and flexible "intercultural thinker." The

textbook prepares the learner to participate in the target culture, but it does not equip them for **strategic improvisation** (that is, flexible and creative action in unpredictable situations) in what Byram refers to as the "Third Place."

Table 5. Representation of Cultural Elements in Lessons 1–10 of *Manabō Nihongo*, Volume III

Lessons	Culture (Visible / Invisible)	Overall Analysis
1	Formal email format, fixed greeting expressions; role-based politeness, indirectness, relationship maintenance	Visible + Strong Invisible
2	Leave request dialogues, health inquiries; providing valid reasons, responsibility, value of health	Visible + Strong Invisible
3	Thank-you letter format, expressions of gratitude; deep appreciation of others' kindness, humility, mutual communication and cooperation	Visible + Strong Invisible
4	Café complaint dialogues, apology expressions; face management, conflict resolution while maintaining harmony, persuasiveness	Visible + Strong Invisible
5	Country stereotypes, comparison structures; understanding through comparison, statistical comparison of countries	Visible + Limited Invisible
6	Earthquake safety measures, technical vocabulary; collective preparedness, calmness in crisis, pragmatism	Visible + Invisible
7	Reporting best-selling items, quotation structures; attributing credibility to sources, indirectness in reporting	Visible + Limited Invisible
8	Online consultation format, daily schedule description; value of perseverance, goal orientation, efficiency	Visible + Invisible
9	Information on beverage consumption; social rituals, conversational coordination	Visible + Invisible
10	Resume format, personality description vocabulary; gender stereotypes, fitting the individual into social roles	Visible + Limited Invisible

The present analysis clearly shows that the pre-intermediate volume of *Manabō Nihongo*, despite its richness of content and language progress, in practice continues the same path of the previous volumes. The textbook is an excellent "cultural resource" but not an "intercultural teaching resource." Its strength lies in presenting authentic cultural contexts and showcasing invisible culture, while its main weakness is the inability to design a pathway that transforms the learner from a "information recipient" into "critical agent in intercultural spaces." This gap highlights even more clearly the need for deliberate teacher intervention or the use of supplementary resources to achieve the goal of developing intercultural competence.

The analysis of the second ten lessons of the pre-intermediate volume shows that this book approaches complex, sensitive, and deeply cultural topics with greater boldness. However, its

fundamental approach toward culture still relies on transmitting information and behavioral patterns, not developing analytical and critical skills. The book makes progress in showing the "what" of Japanese culture but does not create change in teaching "how" to understand, interpret, and interact with this culture in an intercultural space.

In lessons 12, 13, 14, and 17, the textbook reaches its peak in presenting invisible culture through powerful human narratives. Discussions on strategies for integrating international students (Lesson 12), the influence of an inspiring teacher (Lesson 13), a complex ethical-cultural dilemma between family and individual commitment (Lesson 14), and the non-judgmental, mediating role of the police (Lesson 17) all provide exceptional and nuanced insights into Japanese values. These lessons clearly demonstrate that the textbook can go beyond stereotypes. However, the major weakness lies in the lack of a framework for analyzing these complexities. The textbook presents these situations as "stories" or "models" but does not guide the learner toward comparing them with their own culture, critically examining the reasons behind these patterns, or exploring alternative possibilities. For example, Lesson 14, which deals with choosing between family and education, is a golden opportunity to discuss individualism versus collectivism, yet the book merely provides a "correct answer" from a Japanese counselor's perspective.

In Lessons 11, 15, 16, 18, and 19, once again we see the dominance of the informational-practical approach. These lessons focus on understanding and producing various types of formal texts (announcements, weather reports, advertisements, administrative forms) and expressing trends. Although these skills are highly valuable from a practical standpoint, culture here primarily serves as a backdrop for illustrating grammar or a set of objective procedures and lacks the cultural depth of other lessons. Lesson 20, as the conclusion of these ten lessons, symbolically summarizes the overall strengths and weaknesses of the textbook: on one hand, with an inspiring narrative about perseverance, it addresses deep cultural values and even, through an exercise on writing about "incomprehensible" actions, shows a touch of developing the attitude of "suspension of judgment." On the other hand, even here, the textbook stops short of guiding this attitude toward systematic critical analysis.

Within Byram's framework, a consistent pattern repeats: the "knowledge" dimension is well covered, "practical ability" is strengthened, and even "attitude" is touched in an indirect and accidental way (e.g., Lesson 20). However, serious deficiencies appear in the dimensions of "interpreting and relating" and, especially "critical cultural awareness." The textbook teaches the learner what to say and sometimes even how to feel, but it does not teach them how to think. Overall, the pre-intermediate volume of *Manabō Nihongo* is a rich source of "cultural literacy,"

but achieving "intercultural competence" requires deliberate teacher intervention and supplementary activities.

Table 6. Representation of Cultural Elements in Lessons 11–20 of *Manabō Nihongo*, Volume III

Lessons	Culture (Visible / Invisible)	Overall Analysis
11	Official announcement format, administrative language, fixed vocabulary; organizing events, clarity, formality, fairness, efficiency, consideration	Visible + Limited Invisible
12	International students' campus life, country names; conflict between maintaining one's own culture and integration, learning from direct experience, individualism vs. collectivism	Visible + Strong Invisible
13	Studying abroad, place names and occupations; value of teacher-student interaction, emphasis on effort, international experience, cultural relativism	Visible + Strong Invisible
14	Challenges of returning home via educational counseling; family priority, patience and sacrifice, importance of collectivism, conflict resolution indirectly	Visible + Strong Invisible
15	Weather reports, geographic regions, measurement units; accuracy, order, disaster preparedness, collective responsibility, foresight	Visible + Limited Invisible
16	Traditional Japanese inn, hot springs, traditional vocabulary; wabi-sabi, respect for tradition, sense of connection to the past, awareness of societal change	Visible + Invisible
17	Police, running away from home, term "*omawari-san*"; role of police in teaching social behavior, conflict management, emotion control, limited emotional expression	Visible + Strong Invisible
18	Internet usage statistics, research, charts; focus on data collection, generational behavior review, pressure for social participation	Visible + Limited Invisible
19	School grading system, questionnaires, certificates; organization, efficiency, objectivity, attention to individual goals, practical global outlook	Visible + Limited Invisible
20	Rehabilitation, sports for people with disabilities, athlete names; perseverance, goal orientation, importance of role models, active attitude toward disability	Visible + Strong Invisible

The integrated analysis of the first twenty lessons of the pre-intermediate volume of *Manabō Nihongo* provides a clear and compelling final picture that fully supports the main hypotheses of the study. This textbook is an exceptional "cultural resource" but an incomplete "intercultural

teaching resource." The book at the A2 level, with considerable success, integrates invisible culture (values, attitudes, communicative norms) into authentic narratives, real-life situations, and rich texts. This goes far beyond presenting stereotypes and superficial information. Nevertheless, the textbook's approach to this rich content remains consistently descriptive-transmissive. The book lacks a systematic instructional framework to transform this "cultural knowledge" into "intercultural competence." In other words, the book tells the learner, "These are the features of Japanese culture," and even "Behave this way," but it does not equip them with the "reasons why" behind these features, "comparison" with their own culture, or "critical analysis" of them.

5. Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of analyzing the cultural content of the textbook *Manabō Nihongo* based on Hall's framework (visible and invisible culture) and Byram's framework (intercultural competence). The findings indicate that, although the textbook is rich in presenting everyday and practical cultural information, it performs inefficiently in the transitioning from the level of "teaching culture" to "developing intercultural competence." Cultural content is primarily presented descriptively and in the form of visible culture, serving as a backdrop for teaching grammar, while no opportunities are provided for active interaction, analysis of underlying cultural layers, or cultural comparison. Moreover, the textbook also fails to develop components of intercultural competence: cultural-comparison exercises are insufficient for the skills of "discovery and interaction" skills; the absence of role-play and simulated situations limits "practical ability"; "intercultural attitudes" are not promoted, and opportunities for reflection on "critical cultural awareness" are not provided. This study makes clear that simply including cultural content in textbooks does not lead to the development of intercultural competence, and even when dealing with deep cultural concepts such as honorific (*sonkeigo*) and humble (*kenjōgo*) expressions, passive structures expressing inconvenience, or giving-and-receiving verbs the textbook primarily treats these concepts as formal grammatical rules and neglects exploring the underlying social values. Overall, the findings show that while the *Manabō Nihongo* series is rich in providing cultural information, it has performed poorly in developing intercultural competence. This gap should not be seen merely as an educational shortcoming, but rather as an indication of the inherent limitations of traditional approaches to teaching culture. Therefore, to enhance the effectiveness of the book in developing intercultural competence, it is recommended that comparative activities be designed to encourage learners to analyze behaviors, values, and norms of their own culture in comparison with Japanese culture, role-plays and interactive situations be included to practice cultural interaction, sections for critical reflection and analysis of reasons and consequences of intercultural behaviors be

added, and the relationship between linguistic structures and Japanese social values be consciously taught. Ultimately, it can be concluded that transforming culture teaching requires moving from "information transmission" to the "creation of a third cultural space," a space in which the learner is not merely a consumer of culture but an active participant in the process of intercultural understanding and interaction. The findings of this study, which indicate the gap between language and culture instruction in *Manabō Nihongo*, further highlight the necessity of employing active teaching approaches. This necessity aligns with the results of the study by Moharramzadeh, Shobeiry, and Hayati Ashtiani (2024); they showed that implementing "intercultural education" using contemporary literary texts significantly strengthened students' intercultural interaction skills and increased their engagement with literary content.

It is worth noting that the three volumes analyzed in this study correspond to the elementary and pre-intermediate levels of the *Manabō Nihongo* series, levels that naturally focus on teaching foundational language skills and basic competencies. Therefore, it is likely that some of the deeper cultural components, especially those directly involved in forming intercultural competence, are more prominently represented in the intermediate and advanced levels. Based on this, it is recommended that future studies expand their scope to the higher volumes of this series and provide a more comprehensive evaluation of patterns of cultural representation and the educational capacities of these books in strengthening intercultural competence.

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