Fostering the Critical Perspective in Intercultural Competence: The Role of the L2 Japanese Teacher

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Abstract

This study examines an underexplored aspect of intercultural competence, focusing on critical evaluation, communicative criticality, and a critical intercultural perspective. It investigates how an L2 Japanese teacher purposefully integrates a critical approach in an Intercultural Communication course. Insights from the teacher, learners, and institutional authorities reveal a holistic design that blends language and culture through cycles of instruction, discussion, reflection, and evaluation. A key feature is its scaffolding structure and smooth theory-to-practice transitions, supporting critical intercultural development. The teacher plays a vital, evolving role as both mediator and bridge between institutional goals, pedagogy, and learning outcomes.

Keywords: intercultural competence, critical intercultural perspective, L2 Japanese learners, L2 Japanese teacher, L2 Japanese teaching methodology

Povzetek

Ta študija obravnava premalo raziskan vidik medkulturne zmožnosti, s poudarkom na kritični evalvaciji, komunikacijski kritičnosti in kritični medkulturni perspektivi. Raziskuje, kako učitelj japonščine kot tujega jezika namensko vključuje kritični pristop v predmet Medkulturna komunikacija. Pogledi učitelja, udeležencev in institucionalnih predstavnikov razkrivajo celostno zasnovo, ki jezik in kulturo prepleta preko poučevanja, razprav, refleksij in evalvacij. Ključna značilnost je strukturirano postopno učenje ter gladek prehod od teorije k praksi, kar podpira razvoj kritične medkulturne zmožnosti. Učitelj ima pri tem ključno, spreminjajočo se vlogo posrednika in povezovalca med institucionalnimi cilji, pedagogiko in učnimi izidi.

Ključne besede: medkulturna kompetenca, kritična medkulturna perspektiva, učenci japonščine kot tujega jezika, učitelj japonščine kot tujega jezika, metodologija poučevanja japonščine kot tujega jezika

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1 Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the qualifications for successful cross-cultural communication have undergone a profound transformation. Merely mastering a foreign language and acquiring surface-level knowledge of another culture no longer suffices to ensure meaningful and productive interactions. Instead, intercultural competence – a multifaceted blend of personal abilities and acquired skills – has become indispensable in foreign and second language education. While this concept is well established in the field, research on its specific components and their distinct contributions to overall intercultural development remains insufficient.

This study explores a relatively overlooked dimension of intercultural competence, often conceptualized through terms such as "critical evaluation," (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002), "criticality," (Barnett, 1997; Brumfit et al., 2005), "communicative criticality," (Parks, 2018) and "critical approach" or "critical intercultural perspective" (Liddicoat 2020, 2024). Furthermore, there is limited understanding of the practical strategies and methodologies that educators and language teachers/instructors[1] can utilize to cultivate this essential component. To address this gap, the present research investigates the role of L2 Japanese language teachers in designing course syllabi – encompassing structure, topics, materials, and activities – within higher education L2 Japanese classrooms. Within this framework, the study aims to clarify three key aspects:

- How can the critical intercultural perspective be effectively integrated into L2 Japanese instruction, and what might a specific learning activity designed for this purpose look like (RQ1)?
- How do educational authorities, L2 Japanese teachers, and learners interact and perceive the course's approach to fostering critical intercultural awareness (RQ2)?
- How does overall course design systematically support and reflect the instructor's intention to integrate a critical intercultural perspective in the L2 Japanese classroom (RQ3)?

[1] The terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

2 Literature review

2.1 The critical perspective in intercultural competence

In the field of second or foreign language acquisition, many scholars use Byram's (1997, 2002) definition of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as a foundational reference. Byram builds on van Ek's (1986) framework for comprehensive foreign language learning objectives, which emphasizes that foreign language teaching is primarily concerned with the learner's personal and social development as an individual (as cited in Byram, 1997, p. 9). However, Byram extends this perspective, arguing that a key outcome of language learning is the ability of learners to navigate relationships between their own cultural beliefs, behaviors, and meanings (Byram, 1997, p. 12). Thus, he defines the components of intercultural competence as "knowledge, skills, and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to several of social groups. These values are part of one's social identities" (Byram et al., 2002, p. 11).

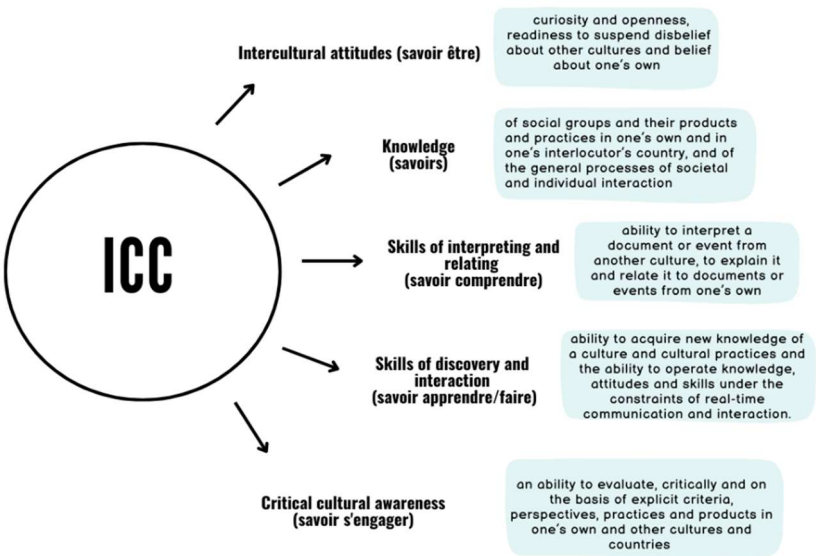

Figure 1: Components of ICC (Byram, 1997)

Building on Byram's model of intercultural competence, a teacher's role is not to transmit facts or master the target culture, but to guide learners in understanding intercultural dynamics, the impact of social identities, and diverse perspectives, while promoting critical thinking (Byram et al., 2002, p. 14). Byram's model highlights critical cultural awareness as key to intercultural competence, emphasizing the ability to critically evaluate cultural perspectives, practices, and products, both one's own and others'.

According to Deardorff (2006), the most widely accepted definitions of intercultural competence include "awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; and self-awareness of one's own culture" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). She notes that the top-rated definition describes intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004, p. 194, as cited in Deardorff 2006, pp. 247–248). Deardorff views intercultural competence as a process with five dimensions that interact with each other. These encompass "requisite attitudes (RA); knowledge and comprehension (K&C); skills (S); desired internal outcomes (DIO); and desired external outcomes (DEO)" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 256).

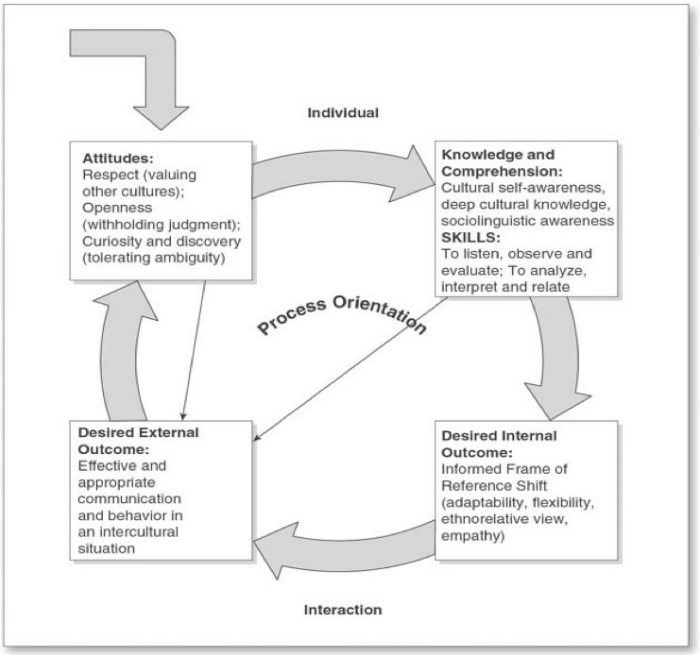

Figure 2: Process model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006, p. 256)

The researcher emphasizes that the level of intercultural competence is determined by the extent of attitudes, knowledge/comprehension, and skills acquired. Throughout this process of multi-level interactions leading to the desired outcome, the ability to listen, evaluate, analyze, interpret, and relate becomes particularly significant. These skills not only stand out but also directly reinforce and align with the critical component of the cycle.

Barnett's (1997) model of criticality theorizes that critical thinking develops across three domains: knowledge, the self, and the world. According to him, criticality in higher education relates to students' abilities

to think critically, understand themselves critically, and act critically – ultimately forming "critical persons" who can engage purposefully with the world (as cited in Parks, 2018, p. 110).

Building on Barnett's model, Parks (2018) introduces a concept called "communicative criticality," which emerges through learning a foreign language. This form of criticality involves reflecting critically on the linguistic systems of both known and studied languages, as well as reconstructing one's sense of self (Parks, 2018, p. 121).

Brumfit et al. (2005), on the other hand, offer a broader definition of criticality that is not confined to language education:

> The motivation to persuade, engage and act on the world and self through the operation of the mindful, analytical, evaluative, interpretive, reflective understanding of a body of relevant knowledge mediated by assimilated experience of how the social and physical environment is structured combined with a willingness and capacity to question and problematize shared perceptions of relevance and experience (Brumfit et al., 2005, p. 149).

According to the authors, several complex factors influence the development of criticality in modern languages. These include the role of the foreign language itself, the experience of studying abroad, learner autonomy and self-reflection, and cross-cultural engagement. This raises the question of whether learning a foreign language inherently enhances students' ability to think and act more critically. To foster reflectiveness and linguistic criticality, the researchers also highlight the importance of developing independence (Brumfit et al., 2005, p. 160).

Liddicoat (2024) offers a fresh perspective on the development of intercultural competence by placing a distinct emphasis on criticality. He encourages learners to reflect on their own intercultural experiences with language and culture as they encounter them throughout the learning process (Liddicoat, 2024, pp. 100–101). At the core of his concept of criticality is mediation, which he defines as a reflexive act wherein the mediator constructs new linguistic representations of understanding (Liddicoat, 2020, p. 27).

This mediation can take place at two different levels. It can involve conveying the meaning of a message for others who do not share the same meaning making and interpretation resources as the author of the message (mediation for others) or it can involve establishing meaningfulness for oneself where initially meaning was problematic in some way (mediation for self) (Liddicoat, 2020, p. 27).

Undeniably, the research conducted by Byram (1997, 2002), Deardorff (2004, 2006, 2011), Parks (2018), Brumfit et al. (2005), and Liddicoat (2020, 2024) establishes significant connections between critical perspectives and intercultural competence. Byram introduces this through *savoir s'engager*, emphasizing the critical evaluation of values and later expanding to power and political dimensions. While Deardorff does not explicitly define a 'critical component,' her model incorporates skills such as analysis and evaluation, highlighting the importance of considering cultural and social implications in assessment – thereby implying a degree of critical awareness. In Parks and Brumfit et al. in view of criticality is the central role and relevance of Barnett's (1997) model of criticality. Liddicoat (2024), in contrast, foregrounds a "critical intercultural perspective," placing strong emphasis on self-reflexivity and a transformational approach to language learning. His framework seeks to develop learners' agency and foster a multi-perspectival understanding through reflective engagement with language and culture.

However, despite the varied terminology used by these scholars to describe criticality – such as criticality, communicative criticality, critical evaluation, and critical intercultural perspective – a common thread in the reviewed research is the idea that reflecting on one's own culture through the lens of another is essential for fostering L2 learners' criticality and intercultural competence.

In this study, we will adopt Liddicoat's (2020, 2024) term – critical intercultural perspective – as it explicitly connects the two concepts discussed above. Evidence suggests that the development of one naturally fosters the growth of the other, highlighting their mutually reinforcing nature.

2.2 Critical intercultural perspective in the classroom

Contemporary research on the role of criticality in second and foreign language education remains limited and lacks practical guidelines for educators on its implementation in the L2 classroom. Since Section 2.1 presents research evidence supporting the link between criticality and intercultural competence, language courses and classroom activities designed to foster intercultural competence should also aim to cultivate critical attitudes.

A significant amount of research explores the development of intercultural competence and the critical perspective beyond the classroom, including the impact of study abroad programs, participation in international projects, virtual communication, and "internationalization at

home (IaH)[2] opportunities" and other "campus-based internationalisation strategies" (Knight, 2013; Sercu, 2023). While classroom activities may offer more limited opportunities for critical intercultural competence development, they play a crucial role in preparing students for real-life intercultural interactions by providing foundational knowledge of the other culture's concepts and perspectives. According to Byram (1997), the classroom has three essential advantages:

> It provides the space for systematic and structured presentation of knowledge in prolongation of the better traditions of language teaching. In addition, it can offer the opportunity for acquisition of skills under the guidance of a teacher. Thirdly, the classroom can be the location for reflection on skills and knowledge acquisition beyond the classroom walls, and therefore for the acquisition of attitudes towards that which has been experienced (Byram, 1997, p. 65).

There is evidence that, with the right curriculum, students can become more interculturally competent during their academic studies, even without actively participating in intercultural initiatives or studying abroad (Sercu, 2023, p. 545).

Scholars emphasize that fostering intercultural competence from a critical perspective in the classroom involves engaging with authentic communication that serves a social purpose and positions learners as active social participants (Benett, 1997; Liddicoat, 2024, p. 100). Activities that promote critical comparative reflection include interpreting documents or events from another culture and relating them to one's own, designing tasks that require critical evaluation of perspectives, engaging in debates, and expressing personal opinions. Additionally, encouraging learners to be both self-critical and analytical, particularly in reflecting on the linguistic systems of their known languages and the target language(s), further supports the development of a critical intercultural perspective (Brumfit et al., 2005; Parks, 2018; Liddicoat, 2024).

Sercu (2023) identifies personal traits like openness, agreeableness, and extraversion as key factors in developing intercultural competence, with openness being particularly crucial. Holubnycha et al. (2019) outline four stages of intercultural competence development: understanding motivation, acquiring cultural knowledge, mastering language behavior through creative tasks, and applying intercultural knowledge in complex situations,

[2] IaH initiatives include the interculturalisation of the curriculum, English-medium degree programs, online exchange projects, or service-learning in cooperation (Sercu, 2023).

recommending activities like analyzing intercultural issues, role-playing, and interactive tasks. Bon (2022) suggests using culturally relevant materials, group discussions, and role-play to foster intercultural competence, while Moeller and Nugent (2014) propose online blog exchanges, anthropological research activities, and exploring cultural artifacts. Nolan and Hickman (2024) emphasize practical pre-departure classroom activities, including videos on cultural perceptions, participation in related activities, and guest speakers to prepare students for study abroad.

Lim and Griffith (2016, p. 1031) provide a comprehensive design for activities aligned with the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) framework. Notably, their approach aims to enhance cultural awareness and knowledge of both learners' native (L1) and target (L2) cultures, often incorporating critical thinking exercises (Lim & Griffith, 2016, p. 1032). The proposed activities include comparative analyses, discussions, and explorations of relationships between L1 and L2 cultural concepts and perceptions. An interesting aspect of their approach is the recommendation to use the learner's native language at the beginning stages of learning, gradually transitioning to greater use of the target language as proficiency increases (Lim & Griffith, 2016, pp. 1032–1033).

Tōgō et al. (2021, p. 78) propose an at-home collaborative learning practice (*kyōdō gakushū*, 共同学習) for Japanese students, designed to foster awareness of the diversity of values within their own nationality and to recognize this diversity as the foundation of intercultural understanding. Similarly, Csendom and Okada (2024, p. 74) suggest that creating short videos based on students' independent research and understanding of other cultures can be an effective method for enhancing their critical intercultural skills). Sercu (2023) highlights the importance of IaH initiatives in fostering intercultural competence within domestic learning environments. These initiatives include integrating international perspectives into the curriculum, offering English-medium degree programs, online exchanges, service-learning, and creating opportunities for peer discussions and buddy systems. By incorporating both formal and informal intercultural elements, IaH initiatives help develop international and intercultural mindsets among students.

The summarized activities emphasize reflection, comparison, critical analysis, and engagement with authentic cultural contexts to foster criticality in language learners. While real-time interaction in the classroom may be limited, instructors can still design tasks that develop critical intercultural competence in L2 learners.

3 The study

3.1 Method

A review of intercultural classroom activities shows that interaction is key to developing intercultural competence. However, research often overlooks practical guidance for educators and pays little attention to the critical dimension of this process.

This study is conducted in an Intercultural Communication course designed for L2 Japanese learners preparing to study or work in Japan. Following Liddicoat (2024), we examine the critical component of intercultural competence, focusing on the language instructor's role in integrating this element into course syllabus design in a higher education L2 Japanese classroom. Within this framework, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: How can the critical intercultural perspective be effectively integrated into L2 Japanese instruction, and what might a specific learning activity designed for this purpose look like?

RQ2: How do educational authorities, L2 Japanese teachers, and learners interact and perceive the course's approach to fostering critical intercultural awareness?

RQ3: How does overall course design systematically support and reflect the instructor's intention to integrate a critical intercultural perspective in the L2 Japanese classroom?

To address RQ1, we present classroom activities that demonstrate the practical application of critical perspective, highlighting the instructor's role in mediating and guiding learners through critical engagement with language and culture. For RQ2, we trace the course design process, beginning with initial consultations with educational authorities. In the latter part of the study, we analyze learner interviews, as well as reflections and lecture notes provided by the L2 Japanese teacher. For RQ3, drawing on insights from negotiations with authorities, as well as the perspectives of learners and the teacher, we examine the program's strengths in systematically supporting its overarching goal of fostering critical intercultural competence.

3.2 Course information

The Intercultural Communication course was designed for second language Japanese learners at the St Cyril and St Methodius University of Veliko

Tarnovo (VTU) in Bulgaria. The course objectives were aligned with fostering intercultural competence, emphasizing key goals such as effective communication in international settings (specifically in Japan) and developing an awareness of one's position within a culturally diverse environment while studying or working in Japan. The course was designed in 2024 for students whose second major was Japanese.

The course structure included both theoretical and practical components, namely lectures (L) and seminars (S) that complemented each other. Additionally, home assignments tailored to support the learning objectives of specific lessons were integrated into the syllabus. The course consisted of 15 sessions, each lasting 90 minutes.

Table 1: Course syllabus

Session	Topics	Type
Intro	Course guidelines (presentation)	L
1	The world around me 1 (presentation)	L
2	The world around me 2 (presentation)	L
3	Socializing and interacting in international events	S
4	Words and usages	S
5	Culture and diversity (presentation)	L
6	Solving culture tasks ("Chasing a dream")	S
7	Intercultural communication (presentation)	L
8	Negotiating meanings (textbook: "The Courage to Ask")	S
9	Japanese society: structure and concepts (presentation)	L
10	サラリーマン *sarariman* 'office workers'	S
11	Stereotypes and attitudes (presentation & alumni visit)	L
12	Does my attitude fall into a stereotype?	S
13	Say something, anything! (textbook)	S
14	Creating your perfect home (textbook)	S
15	I want us to be friends! (textbook & alumni visit)	S
Closing 1	Individual interviews	S
Closing 2	Focus group interview	S

3.3 Learning materials, resources and evaluation

The teacher prepared presentations based on topics that aligned with students' interests, introducing fundamental concepts in each session. Two types of tasks were incorporated: problem-solving exercises and case studies. These activities were primarily drawn from two sources: the

textbook *Bijinesu komyunikēshon no tame no kēsu gakushū, shokuba no daibāshiti de manabiau* ビジネスコミュニケーションのためのケース学習・職場のダイバーシティで学び合う 'Case studies for business communication: Learning from the workplace diversity' written by Kondō et al. (2015), and a free online educational resource provided by the Japan Foundation, titled *Suan nihon e iku!* スアン日本へ行く！ 'Xuan Tackles Japan!' and directed by Takashi (2022).[3] The latter is a short educational Japanese drama series available on the Japan Foundation's website under the section *Hikidasu nihongo* ひきだすにほんご 'Eliciting Japanese'.

Two valuable sessions were held with the alumni (*senpai*) who had studied or worked in Japan. Planned in collaboration with the teacher, these sessions took the form of seminars featuring problem-solving tasks and open discussions. What made them distinctive was that the tasks, framed as *Challenges from senpai*, were designed by the alumni themselves and based on real-life situations they had encountered in Japan. These challenges encouraged students to think critically and apply their classroom learning in practical contexts. The sessions also offered a meaningful opportunity for students to hear the perspectives of the alumni, adding authenticity and depth to the learning experience. The teacher facilitated the sessions, guiding reflection and ensuring connections to course content. In addition to offering practical, experience-based insight into the Japanese workplace and social culture, the sessions helped foster a more relaxed atmosphere and narrowed the distance between the participants and the alumni.

As a means of evaluating students' performance, beyond classroom observations and field notes, each student was asked to complete a reflection sheet (Appendix 1) after every lesson. The sheet included three sections: the first asked learners to reflect on how the topic related to their existing knowledge; the second focused on the new knowledge they had acquired through that day's classroom activities; and the third invited them to note any remaining questions or doubts they had after the class. The reflection sheet was used for several purposes: to evaluate the learners' overall performance, to contribute to their portfolio, and to help distinguish between their existing knowledge and the insights gained through class activities. Additionally, the third section of the reflection sheet allowed the teacher to identify gaps in the learners' understanding and provide appropriate feedback. It also served as a valuable source for generating targeted instruction together with the explicit instruction originally planned in the course.

[3] www.hikidasu.jpf.go.jp/en/corner/drama/

3.4 Participants

Initially, eight students with Japanese as their second major registered for the course. However, only four attended regularly after the course began. All participants were second-year students at VTU. Their information, including years of studying Japanese and interests related to Japanese, is summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Participants' information

Participants*/ Gender	Grade	Jap. level	Major	Japanese background Interest (years)
S1/M	2	A2	Computer science	2 Manga and anime
S2/F	2	A2	International relations	2 Manga and anime
S3/F	2	B1	Applied linguistics	4 Japanese language and culture
S4/M	2	A2	Computer science	2 Manga and anime Japanese politics and economy

* Students are listed in the order they registered for the course.

3.5 Tools

Data were collected over five months through observations of student performance in language and culture tasks, supported by field notes. The course syllabus, activities, materials, and student portfolios were also reviewed. The course design process, including discussions with educational authorities, was tracked. Each student participated in a final semi-structured interview focusing on teaching methods and course structure, followed by a focus group for shared reflection. The interview protocol was adapted from Nolan and Hickman (2024) with the slightly modified final two questions to suit the study's aims and course-specific context. Below are the interview questions.

1. In what ways (if at all) did the tasks, activities, or assignments used throughout the course help you in behaving and communicating effectively in case you are supposed to have an intercultural interaction?
2. What teaching methods (pedagogy) would have helped prepare you more? What methods do you think were not very useful? Why?

3. In what ways did your knowledge or attitudes about people from other cultures change through the course? Can you share examples? (adapted from Nolan & Hickman, 2024, p. 622).

In line with established guidelines for conducting qualitative interviews, including semi-structured formats, several recommended protocols were observed (McGrath et al., 2018; Taherdoost, 2022). In this case, due to the specific focus and context of the research, the interviews were conducted by the instructor who had taught the course. To minimize the influence of authority and ensure the integrity of the feedback, the interviews took place only after final grades had been submitted and released. Students were explicitly assured that their responses would remain anonymous and would have no impact on their grades or academic standing. Participation was entirely voluntary; students were informed that they could skip any question or withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences. The instructor emphasized that the purpose of the interviews was to improve teaching practices, not to evaluate students. Additionally, the interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for the participants to ensure their comfort and autonomy.

Four interviews were conducted, each lasting between 20 and 45 minutes. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using *Taguette*, a software that allows users to organize qualitative data, highlight text sections, and assign codes and themes. Additionally, a 90-minute focus group session was held to facilitate interactive discussions, allowing the four participants to share perspectives in a social context and uncover insights that might not emerge in individual interviews. Field notes were also transcribed and coded for analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 Designing the course: Process and institutional perspectives

In designing the Intercultural Communication course, several key factors were considered: the educational institution's requirements, students' needs and interests, the course's overarching objectives, and the practical applications of a critical intercultural perspective. The university's fixed requirements, class size, student majors, and course goals left limited flexibility. Within these constraints, the instructor designed a course to help develop globally competent human resources.

A preliminary survey was conducted among L2 Japanese learners to address students' needs and interests. This survey played a pivotal role in

shaping the syllabus and selecting topics for lectures and seminars. As outlined in Section 2, there is a notable lack of practical guidance for language instructors on structuring classes to effectively integrate a critical intercultural perspective. This gap necessitated innovative approaches to ensure that the course met institutional goals and students' aspirations while fostering meaningful engagement with intercultural communication concepts.

The lesson plans followed the JF standard for Japanese-language education (Japan Foundation, 2010), based on the CEFR framework (2001), and tailored for L2 Japanese instruction. Each seminar's goal was framed as a *can-do* statement and aligned with learners' proficiency level, emphasizing practical tasks for building language skills and intercultural understanding.

In designing the learning activities for each seminar, we followed the frameworks outlined by the scholars whose research we reviewed in Section 2. Based on these insights, we developed a list of key supportive elements to consider when planning the contents (tasks, assignments, discussions, screenings, etc.) of the seminars. Activities should:

1. Integrate language and content, treating them as interconnected rather than separate entities.
2. Focus on analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting information and experiences within the target language and culture.
3. Encourage a 'dissociation' from the familiar to foster a critical perspective.
4. Provide opportunities for authentic communication with a social purpose.
5. Facilitate reflection on learners' responses to diversity, creating space for them to understand their own enculturation and that of others.
6. Develop learners' abilities as linguistic and cultural mediators.
7. Promote learner independence and self-criticism, essential for the development of criticality – learners should take responsibility for their own learning, reflect on their linguistic choices, and critically analyze their work and that of their peers.[4]

Most of the learning activities were designed in alignment with the principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Van den Branden, 2006;

[4] Based on Byram (1997, 2002), Deardorff (2004, 2006, 2011), Parks (2018), Brumfit et al. (2005) and Liddicoat (2020, 2024).

Vandommele et al., 2018). In this approach, the task functions as the central unit of analysis across three key dimensions: learning objectives or syllabus, instructional practices or methodology, and assessment (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 12). Tasks and performance-based activities were conducted in Japanese, while instructor-led discussions and prompts were primarily delivered in Bulgarian when necessary. Research suggests that this approach more effectively fosters a critical intercultural perspective (Lim & Griffith, 2016, pp. 1032–1033).

First, a sample course syllabus was presented for discussion with university authorities and other L2 Japanese teachers. These discussions played a crucial role in refining and adapting the content to better align with the methodology for integrating the critical component into the learning process. The discussions were transcribed, and key themes that provided additional guidance for course design were identified. Recommendations and solutions for each weakness were provided, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Key themes, weaknesses, and solutions

Key themes	Weakness	Solution
Theory & practice	The balance between theory and practice is insufficient in developing a critical intercultural perspective.	More seminars with practical tasks that require complex and multifaceted cognitive processes were added.
Outside class activities & other learning initiatives	Lack of outside class activities to further support the development a critical intercultural perspective.	Two intercultural interaction activities were added: Online International Forum and the One Day Exchange Program.
Technology & digitalization	Insufficient use of contemporary tools for educational purposes.	Both video-recording platforms and creative tasks using tools like Adobe Spark, Padlet, or iMovie, along with language exchange platforms, were recommended and used in class.

* The syllabus is the one presented in Section 3.2, Table 1.

4.2 Example of the critical perspective in L2 Japanese practice

As explained in Section 4.1, most tasks were designed as multifaceted initiatives that unfold in multiple layers. They foster critical attitudes in L2 Japanese learners and align with the objectives of the Intercultural Communication course. These tasks aim to develop not only linguistic proficiency but also sociolinguistic competence, allowing learners to find practical meaning through their completion. Below, we present a four-stage

task designed to illustrate the instructor's role in fostering learners' critical perspectives and guiding them toward reinterpreting familiar concepts in new ways.[5]

In the first stage, students were assigned Task #1 as homework (see Task #1 below). Framed in this way, the task extends beyond mere linguistic practice. The instructor's approach also targets cognitive processes, encouraging students to structure and systematize familiar concepts related to the Japanese pronoun *anata* あなた 'you'. The task was delivered via a video message on an educational platform, and students responded by recording their video messages on the same platform.

Task #1

In what situations/when would you use the word *anata* あなた 'you'? Please, reason your answer!

During the course, the task was administered following a presentation on *Words and usages* in the Japanese language, which introduced the concepts of high-context and low-context communication. The session examined ambiguity in Japanese through phrases such as *chotto* ちょっと 'a little', *kondo* こんど 'next time', *daijōbu* だいじょうぶ 'alright' and *ariyori no nashi* ありよりのなし 'closer to *no* than *yes*', highlighting how meanings shift depending on the context. It also addressed a common tendency among native speakers to omit personal pronouns, including *anata* あなた 'you'. This discussion served as a transition to the aforementioned homework that focused specifically on the use and implications of *anata* あなた 'you' in Japanese discourse.

To assess changes in learners' perspectives over time and track progress in their knowledge and cognitive skills, Task #1 was administered twice: first, five months prior to their enrolment in the course, and again midway through the course. Below are the transcribed responses from both instances.

Session 1 (prior to the enrolment)

S1: "I would probably use *anata* when speaking to a stranger because I don't know their name."

S2: "I think *anata* is similar to the English *you*, so I would use it when I don't know the person's name."

[5] Linguistic competence, as viewed through second language acquisition theories, is beyond the scope of this discussion.

S3: “Maybe when speaking to a stranger.”

S4: “I’ve read that it is used within families, particularly between spouses.”

Session 2 (midway)

S1: “It is used between spouses. It can be used toward a stranger, but it would be very rude if the person holds a higher social status or is older. It may also be used within one’s *uchi* circle (note: *uchi* 内 ‘inner circle’), but it’s generally better to use names or professional or academic titles.”

S2: “I think *anata* can be used both formally and informally when addressing someone whose name is unknown. However, it should never be used for someone of higher social status. Overall, it is rarely used in conversation and is even considered impolite according to Japanese social norms. It’s better to use the person’s name, and… repeating *anata, anata, anata* multiple times is especially inappropriate.”

S3: “I would use *anata* with strangers but would try to avoid it, as I’ve read that Japanese people generally do not accept it well. It can be used by a boss or among friends and peers, but never toward someone of higher social status. I was surprised by its wide usage and complex nature. To avoid unintentional offense, it’s best to use a person’s name instead. In emails, using *anata* would be considered rude since the recipient's name is usually known.”

S4: “I would use *anata* when I have no information about a person, such as their name, social status, or position. However, using names in conversation is more polite. It can be confusing because, in Bulgarian, we have several alternatives to *anata*, none of which are considered rude and are commonly used in conversation. Additionally, *anata* is often used by wives to address their husbands.”

As is immediately evident from the transcribed texts above, the two sets of responses differ in length and content. The first set consists of brief answers with little or no reasoning, mentioning only two specific usages of *anata* あなた ‘you’: 1) addressing strangers and 2) use within the family, namely between a husband and a wife. In contrast, the midway responses are more developed, incorporating a variety of possible usages and perspectives. To the previously mentioned contexts, students have added friends, peers, and inner-circle individuals. They also specify different its mediums, such as spoken and written communication, and explore the rules governing its usage. Additionally, they engage with key cultural concepts like *uchi*, social hierarchy, and social expectations, demonstrating a deeper

understanding of the inter-connection between language, culture, and society.

It is evident that the learners have adopted a critical approach to the issue, striving to find a balanced response that aligns with Japanese social norms while also drawing comparisons to their own cultural experiences. This reflects their growing ability to analyze language use within a broader sociocultural context, considering both linguistic appropriateness and cultural sensitivity. Notably, learners make interesting comparisons between the usage of *anata* あなた 'you' in Japanese and the pronoun *you* in Bulgarian. They reflect on how the Bulgarian offers various forms of *you* (singular and plural) that indicate different levels of politeness and are commonly used in conversation without being considered rude. In contrast, *anata* あなた 'you' is subject to stricter cultural and social rules in Japanese. This comparison underscores the learners' increasing awareness of cultural differences and their efforts to connect their linguistic norms with those of Japanese.

At the next stage, the role of the Japanese language teacher is crucial in further developing the critical perspectives of L2 Japanese learners. Task #1 was assigned as homework, followed by an in-class discussion that introduced specific scenarios and encouraged students to explore both appropriate and alternative uses of *anata* あなた 'you'. The discussion aimed not only to identify strategies for avoiding *anata* あなた 'you' by Japanese social norms but also to recognize contexts where its use is appropriate.

As Liddicoat (2024) suggests, to foster critical thinking in intercultural competence, the instructor (or researcher) should pose additional questions, seek reactions from learners/students, prompt, and encourage them to interpret their observations and personal experiences. This approach provides the necessary "impetus for languaging" to occur (Liddicoat, 2024, p. 106). As a further development of the initial task, two additional discussion-based tasks were introduced in the classroom. In the first, students proposed alternative strategies to avoid using *anata* あなた 'you' when they felt its use was inappropriate. In the second, they identified and demonstrated a context where its use was acceptable.

Task #2

If someone (a Japanese) sitting next to you in a cinema forgets their smartphone on the seat after the movie ends, how would you call out to them and return it?

Task #3

If you see a group of young Japanese people drinking in the park and leaving garbage behind, how would you address them?

Several factors were analyzed as triggers for changes in the transition from Task #1 to subsequent tasks. First, the instructor considered the learners' existing linguistic knowledge of pronoun use. While all students were familiar with three basic interpretations related to social hierarchy, psychological distance, and family relationships, only one recognized context and situation as factors influencing the choice of a pronoun.

Second, the contexts chosen for Task #2 and Task #3 were intended to expand learners' understanding beyond purely linguistic knowledge toward sociolinguistic awareness. Specifically, these tasks explore how formal versus informal situations and inappropriate social behavior impact pronoun selection. The tasks also introduce varied social interactions: Task #2 involves a one-on-one encounter with a stranger in a public setting, whereas Task #3 requires addressing a group, adding complexity in navigating social roles, politeness levels, and group dynamics. These scenarios challenge learners to manage appropriate politeness strategies and face-saving techniques in culturally sensitive contexts.

Third, the tasks were designed to enhance learner agency in problem-solving, supporting a shift from metalinguistic reflection to authentic language use. Tasks #2 and #3 immerse learners in practical, everyday social situations that demand spontaneous language application, moving beyond the more abstract, theoretical reflection of Task #1.

Following Liddicoat's (2024) guidelines, the lecturer encouraged learners to engage in deeper reflection by sharing their experiences, thoughts, doubts, and strategies for addressing the issue in the suggested situations. The following excerpts from discussions with the focus group illustrate how L2 Japanese learners have adopted a critical attitude toward the use of *anata* あなた 'you', demonstrating their ability to analyze its appropriateness within different sociocultural contexts. Excerpt 1 is based on Task #2, and Excerpt 2 follows Task #3.

Excerpt 1:

Teacher: "How about situations where the person you are referring to is a stranger and obviously older than you, would you still try to avoid *anata*?"

S1: "Well… that would be quite complicated. If it's about a dropped handkerchief or a forgotten smartphone, and I need to call out to return

it, I would struggle to find the best way to address them. Maybe the usual *sumimasen* (note: すみません 'excuse me') would work. Or perhaps a gentle tap on the shoulder from behind, followed by handing the item back…"

Teacher: "What prevents you from using *anata* あなた 'you' in this situation?"

S1: "Perhaps the fact that the person is older than me and the context of the situation itself. If it were a child, I might say *Anata no sumaho desuka* あなたのスマホですか 'Is this your smartphone'. In Bulgarian culture, I would naturally use one of the polite forms of *you*, but in Japanese culture, the numerous social restrictions make me carefully consider my words before speaking."

Teacher: "What would happen if you spoke without overthinking?"

S1: "I'm not sure… I just don't want to sound rude. Obviously, I'm a foreigner and may not fully understand the various nuances of the language and how they relate to the situation. So, …perhaps the person I'm addressing would excuse me and not be upset…"

Excerpt 1 reveals the learner's (S1) struggle to determine the best choice and adjust his verbal behavior according to the situation at hand. The lecturer prompts S1 to reflect on the reasons behind his choice. While utilizing his knowledge of the language and its social rules, S1 finds the process challenging but continues to adhere to the Japanese social norms he is confident about. S1 also identifies an alternative situation where he would be in a higher social position, which would allow him to use *anata* あなた 'you'. The lecturer further challenges S1 with another question, leading the learner to contemplate his dual identity as both a second language Japanese learner and a foreigner in Japan. As a foreigner speaking Japanese, S1 realizes that he might be excused for sounding impolite, but as a learner, he acknowledges his limitations in real-life situations. This excerpt shows that the student is not simply absorbing information; rather, they are critically engaging with the complexities of using a second language within its cultural context, negotiating meaning and seeking strategies to navigate social expectations.

Excerpt 2:

S3: "I could say that since I started learning Japanese, I've become more polite—or perhaps more indirect… even when I speak Bulgarian… (laughs)."

Teacher: "Is this a good thing or a bad one?"

S3: "I'm not sure. I guess it depends on the situation in both countries. In Bulgaria, it might be misunderstood. But in Japan, I'd probably make a good impression."

Teacher: "What about a situation where someone's behavior, by all social norms, would be considered improper, like speaking loudly in public or leaving garbage behind? Would you still be very polite and not say anything?"

S3: "I guess in that case, one could use *anata* or *anatatachi* (note: あなたたち 'you (pl.)') to refer to the person, but if it were me… I'm a foreigner, and I don't want to sound too confrontational. I probably wouldn't say anything, or I'd start my remark with *sumimasen* (note: すみません 'excuse me') or *ano* (note: あのう、、、、、、 'um…'")

Teacher: "So, your strategy is to play it safe?"

S3: "Yes, I guess so… By the way, it's very strange that in Japanese, they don't have independent words for *Mr.* or *Mrs.* like we do in other languages. They only have suffixes like *san* さん, *chan* ちゃん, *kun* くん, or *sama* 様, attached to names. If they had standalone words for titles, it would be so much easier to find appropriate equivalents for each situation."

As seen in Excerpt 2, Situation 2 prompted an interesting realization from S3 regarding how learning Japanese has influenced her behavior in Bulgarian and shaped her identity. This conversation highlights S3's critical reflection on how Japanese has affected her communication style in both languages. Her uncertainty about the appropriateness of being indirect in Bulgarian demonstrates an awareness of cultural differences. Additionally, S3 discusses the challenge of navigating cultural norms, explaining how, as a foreigner, she tends to avoid confrontation, instead opting for politeness and neutrality in difficult situations.

This conversation also reveals the learner's growing awareness of the dynamic nature of identity. While in Bulgaria, S3's exposure to Japanese has led her to adopt a more moderate tone in her speech. Conversely, in Japan, she anticipates that her identity would be shaped by her cultural and linguistic background, which differs from the Japanese norm. Therefore, she recognizes the importance of adapting her behavior based on different cultural contexts.

Different variables may have contributed to this reflection. Prior to the conversation with S3, the class had discussed microaggressions in the Japanese language, specifically, how certain words and phrases create a boundary or reinforce a distinction between *Japaneseness* and *otherness*.

Examples include terms and expressions such as *gaijin* 外人 'foreigner', *hāfu* ハーフ 'half-Japanese, *junjapa* 純ジャパ 'a fully ethnically Japanese person', or comments like *Anata wa nanijin?* あなたは何人？ 'What nationality are you?', *Ohashi ga jōzudesune!* お箸が上手ですね！ 'You use chopsticks well!', and *Nihongo ga nihonjin yori umai!* 日本語が日本人よりうまい！ 'Your Japanese is better than a native speaker's!'. The class also explored the expectation among Japanese people that all foreigners should speak English fluently, as well as the tendency to associate certain nationalities with fixed stereotypes. This prior discussion may have influenced the reflections S3 shared in Excerpt 2.

Attention should also be given to the learner's personality. In other classes, she tends to remain quiet, whereas in this class, she showed notable enthusiasm in expressing herself. This shift might be attributed not only to the prior class discussion, which served as a transition from explicit instruction to personal reflection and critical thinking, but also to the teacher's approach, the small number of participants, the relaxed atmosphere, or her interest in the topic.

At the third stage, learners are asked to complete a reflection sheet after class, where they share new insights, discoveries, or changes in opinion that emerged from discussing the issue.

At the final stage, the teacher provides feedback on the reflection sheets and presents new challenges to the learners via a video message. These challenges are tailored to each student's reflections and discoveries related to the topic. They may involve a new question, an internet-based research task, or another activity aimed at encouraging further exploration and stimulating new cognitive processes. In this way, the development of the critical perspective extends beyond the classroom, equipping learners to tackle real-life tasks and engage in cross-cultural communication when the time comes.

Besides being multifaceted, the task stages are typically structured to progress in an upward trajectory, with each stage building on the previous one, increasing cognitive complexity, and acting as a key to unlock the next stage. Each stage may take a different form (in terms of meaning) for each learner, and the path (in terms of critical perspective) to the next stage is not always linear, as it requires varying degrees of cognitive effort (Figure 3).

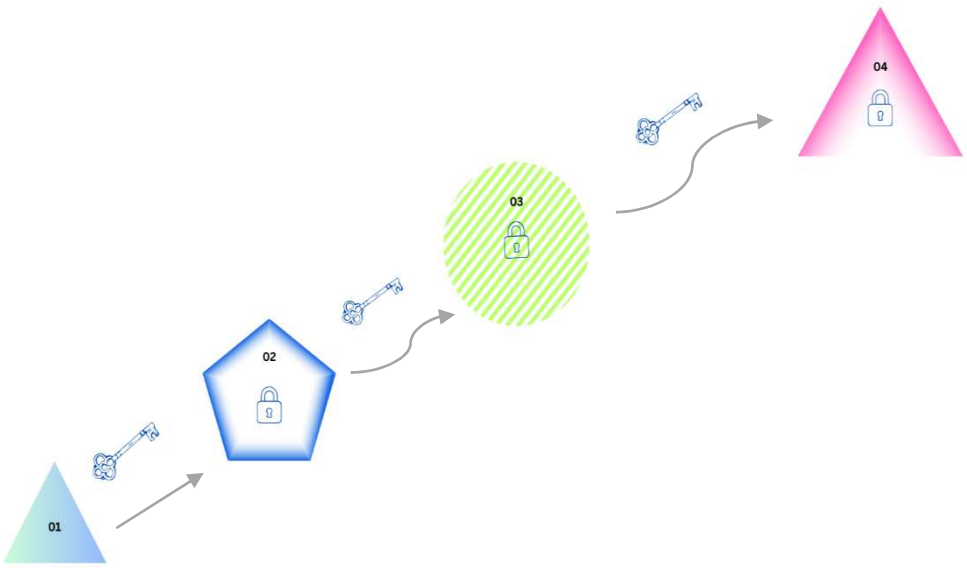

Figure 3: Relationship between task stages and cognitive processes

4.3 Course methodology: Learners' and teacher's perspectives

4.3.1 Learners' perspective

As Nolan and Hickman (2024) mention, a well-structured "pedagogical framework" is highly effective in developing intercultural competence, particularly in preparing students for short-term study abroad programs (Nolan & Hickman, 2014, p. 613). However, it is also a crucial component of at-home projects with the same objective. The Intercultural Communication course syllabus combined lectures and seminars with a strong focus on task-based learning. Students completed home assignments, engaged in practical intercultural interactions beyond the classroom, and benefited from visits by senior students and alumni who had studied at Japanese universities. Digital education and high technologies were also prioritized as key learning tools. These pedagogical components, along with the instructor's holistic approach, played a significant role in fostering students' critical perspectives. The following excerpts from participant interviews highlight how these experiences contributed to their ability to reflect critically on intercultural issues:

> S1: "It was, eh…beneficial that, before engaging in practical tasks and solving culture-related incidents or tasks, we had a theoretical foundation embedded in the course. This provided essential concepts

crucial for understanding and interacting with Japanese culture. I feel well-prepared both theoretically and practically."

S2: "The entire process of thinking and sharing was highly engaging and somewhat liberating, which feels quite innovative for a language and culture course, I think… The freedom to express oneself in Bulgarian further enhanced this sense of openness. I also appreciated the teacher's approach of being one of us, sharing her thoughts, doubts, and insecurities, which created a more inclusive and supportive learning environment."

S3: "The integration of online forums, multimedia content, and language learning platforms creates opportunities not only to enhance language skills but also to foster critical thinking. When teachers use authentic digital materials from the target culture, we are encouraged to analyze content, question cultural norms, and compare perspectives. These tasks require more than memorization; they demand interpretation, reflection, and evaluation… In fact, I think this course is very well-structured and somewhat innovative in its challenging nature. Each time, we're presented with a new challenge, and what's exciting is that the challenge is different for everyone."

S4: "I don't think we've ever had a course before where we could learn and reflect on intercultural issues in such a relaxed, pressure-free way, yet still naturally. It's also quite new to use so many digital tools to review, summarize, and systematize our thoughts."

Coding the interviews revealed six key themes related to the methodology and various pedagogical approaches used in the course (see Table 4).

Table 4: Key themes derived from interview data

Key themes	Code words
Theoretical foundation & preparation	theory, foundation, concepts, understanding, knowledge, preparation, learning, culture
Engagement and interaction	engaging, discussion, sharing, expressing, interaction, peer, thoughts, participation
Teacher's approach & inclusivity	teacher, inclusive, openness, support, relatable, approach, guidance
Innovative and challenging course structure	innovation, challenge, structure, dynamic, new, unique, experience, reflection
Relaxed learning environment	relaxed, pressure-free, natural, freedom, comfort, expression, ease
Use of digital tools	digital, tools, systematize, summarize, review, technology, modern, organize

Three of the six identified themes directly highlight the role of the L2 Japanese teacher in the course. The first, Theoretical foundation and preparation, reflects the teacher's role in providing explicit instruction, particularly through the structured delivery of foundational knowledge. The second theme, Teacher's approach & inclusivity, emphasizes the teacher's responsibility in creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. Through open communication, relatable teaching methods, and attentive guidance, the teacher fosters a sense of belonging and encourages active participation from all students, regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds. The third theme, Innovative and challenging course structure, highlights the teacher's role in designing a dynamic and thought-provoking learning environment. By integrating novel activities, reflective tasks, and intercultural challenges, the teacher encourages learners to question assumptions, recognize multiple viewpoints, and develop a more nuanced understanding of intercultural competence.

The other three themes have a more indirect connection to the role of the instructor, with their influence being largely connotational rather than explicit. The Engagement and interaction theme, for example, reflects students' active participation, peer collaboration, and willingness to express ideas – factors that are shaped by the teacher's facilitation strategies and the overall classroom climate. Relaxed learning environment similarly points to a sense of comfort, freedom, and ease in communication, which, while not always directly orchestrated by the teacher, is often a byproduct of their tone, responsiveness, and openness. Finally, the Use of digital tools theme shows how students engage with course technology; while tools may be institutional, the instructor's integration and support largely determine their effectiveness in learning.

4.3.2 Teacher's perspective

Throughout the course, the instructor maintained reflective notes on classes (hereafter, *Notes*) to document both the challenges and the positive outcomes of the planned activities. The *Notes* aim to inform future course revisions, support continuous improvement, and function as a tool for self-evaluation. Notes on the topics were coded, and five key themes were identified, each relating to the critical intercultural perspective of the activities (see Table 5).

Table 5: Key themes derived from Notes

Key themes	Indicative keywords / phrases from reflections
Critical perspective and cultural awareness	new angle, never thought about, surprise, differences within same country or community, questioning assumptions
Reflective awareness and identity	personal episodes, reflection, identity, own experiences, self-understanding, emotional reactions
Experiential and interactive engagement	shared stories, alumni experiences, real-life context, student-led examples
Pedagogical practice and course design	balance between instruction and interaction, well-designed, structure, transition between theory and practice
Relaxed learning environment	relaxed, pressure-free, natural, freedom, comfort, expression, ease
Fostering dialogue and critical discussion	class discussions, sharing opinions, strategies to talk with strangers, open conversation

These five themes, distilled from reflective teaching notes, capture the essential pedagogical and cognitive elements involved in cultivating critical intercultural competence. The presence of surprise, questioning, and the reconsideration of cultural assumptions signals the emergence of a critical perspective, as articulated in the first theme. The second theme highlights moments when students connect theoretical concepts to their personal identities and lived experiences, indicating a deepening reflective awareness – an essential dimension of intercultural learning. The third theme underscores the importance of experiential and dialogic engagement, which helps anchor abstract ideas in authentic, real-world interactions, thereby enhancing personal relevance and meaning. Effective course design, including structured transitions between input and interaction, enables this complex learning to unfold. Finally, creating opportunities for open, student-led discussions encourages learners to explore ambiguity and diversity of thought, both of which are central to developing critical competence in intercultural contexts. Each theme thus reflects a distinct but interconnected aspect of how the course fosters not just knowledge of culture, but the ability to think critically across cultural boundaries.

However, the overall tone of the *Notes* remains critical, with attention also given to the challenges encountered in the course. Although the task types, centered around problem-solving and case studies, aligned well with the course's aim of fostering critical intercultural competence, the teacher notes that designing effective transitions between explicit instruction and

discussion-based activities was particularly difficult. When the lecture portion introduced new perspectives that surprised students, it often stimulated their imagination and led to vivid, in-depth discussions. A similar effect was observed when the teacher or invited alumni shared personal experiences, which served as authentic entry points for critical engagement. In contrast, when such stimuli were absent, the tasks and subsequent discussions tended to lack energy and depth, often failing to meet their intended objectives.

Another challenge relates to the teacher's experience and skill in guiding classroom discussions toward deeper, more focused reflection. Without careful facilitation, there is a risk that conversations may remain at the level of casual or interesting exchanges rather than progressing toward critical analysis and meaningful personal insight.

The tools used to evaluate learners' performance are of particular concern in this type of course, especially given the small number of participants. In addition to the teacher's observations, evaluation included interviews, student portfolios, and a carefully designed reflection sheet distributed after each class. The primary purpose of the reflection sheet was to help learners distinguish between their prior knowledge and the new understanding gained through classroom activities. The teacher used it not only to provide personalized feedback but also to assign additional reflective tasks tailored to each learner. This approach ensured that the development of a critical perspective extended beyond the completion of a topic and continued outside the classroom context. Another method involved reintroducing similar tasks over time to monitor changes and progress in students' performance. However, in the future, alternative approaches should also be considered, such as having students complete a task before being taught a specific strategy and then repeating the task afterward to assess the impact of instruction.

There is also the persistent concern that the lecture content or the accompanying task may not always resonate with the learners' interests or experiences, which in turn can hinder the reflective depth of classroom conversations and discussions.

Therefore, the challenges outlined above should be carefully considered when planning the course for the next academic year or when designing a similar course in the future. Particular attention should be given to refining the transition between theoretical input and discussion-based activities, ensuring that each task is clearly anchored in the learners' experiences and interests. Additionally, strategies to better support in-depth, critically

reflective dialogue, such as targeted facilitation techniques or scaffolding questions, should be incorporated.

5 Discussion

The present course was designed to systematically and consistently foster intercultural competence, with a particular focus on the development of a critical perspective among L2 Japanese learners. This study aimed to explore the role of the L2 Japanese teacher throughout the entire process of course design, implementation, and revision. To achieve this, the analysis considered three perspectives: that of the educational authorities, the learners, and the L2 teacher responsible for the course.

In the initial stage of course design, alongside the teacher's intentions, dialogue with educational authorities played a crucial role in outlining the general syllabus to ensure it met the requirements set by the authorities. During this phase, the teacher acted as a collaborator, negotiator, and mediator, bridging the legal and institutional framework of the discipline with its practical application. This ensured that the course not only complied with official guidelines but also aligned with its educational goals and remained engaging for learners. Several key priorities guided the course design: (1) holistic integration of language and culture, (2) balancing theory and practice to foster critical intercultural competence, and (3) utilizing advanced technologies and digital tools.

The analysis of learners' reflections on the course methodology revealed three key strengths, highlighting both the promotion of critical intercultural competence and the teacher's deliberate intent to achieve this through the overall course design. First, learners emphasized the importance of a strong theoretical foundation as a starting point for the course's development. Second, the teacher's inclusive approach contributed to a relaxed classroom atmosphere, which was perceived as both empowering and motivating, fostering active participation in class activities. Third, learners valued the innovative and challenging nature of the course, particularly the diverse range of materials, tools, and methods used to promote engagement. This aspect revealed a dynamic interplay between external stimuli, such as course tasks and instructor guidance, and internal cognitive processes, as learners synthesized new information through the lens of their lived experiences. Notably, this third feature emerged as a distinctive strength compared to other courses the learners had previously taken.

The perspective of the L2 Japanese teacher, combined with that of the learners, enriches the evaluation of the course design and offers valuable

guidance for future intercultural education initiatives. A key design feature was the deliberate sequencing between instructional input and interactive activities, which proved essential in supporting both cognitive and emotional complexity. Open, student-led discussions enabled learners to explore ambiguity, negotiate diverse viewpoints, and engage with the foundational elements of intercultural competence.

The instructor's experience highlighted a crucial pedagogical insight: that explicit instruction alone is insufficient. Instead, effective learning required a dynamic, recursive process involving explicit instruction, discussion, reflection, further discussion, evaluation, and targeted re-instruction. This pedagogical cycle fostered sustained critical engagement and provided the scaffolding necessary for the development of intercultural competence.

An analysis of the instructor's reflective notes revealed an additional core principle: the importance of a smooth and meaningful transition from theory to practice. This insight, while articulated primarily from the teacher's perspective, was also reinforced by learner feedback. Both groups pointed to the role of engaging topics, the inclusion of alumni voices, and the use of surprising or emotionally resonant content in fostering deeper learning. These elements supported not only successful task completion but also the internalization of critical intercultural awareness.

The L2 Japanese instructor, drawing on roles established in the literature – mentor, facilitator, coordinator, cultivator of a positive classroom climate, provider of feedback, and monitor of self and task performance (Kubanyiova, 2015; Hiver et al., 2021; Qiu, 2022) – also acted as a mediator in learners' cognitive and emotional development. This mediation was not limited to cultural interpretation but extended to the reflexive positioning of the self in interaction, in line with Liddicoat's (2020, p. 27) conception of mediation as a dialogic, reflexive practice. As shown in Section 4.2, a seemingly routine linguistic exercise, reviewing the use of a Japanese pronoun, became a site for critical engagement with cultural identity and relational positioning.

When viewed together, the perspectives of both learners and the instructor converge on several key themes. Both emphasize the effective integration of theory and practice, the challenging nature of the curriculum, and the diversity of methods and materials that promote reflection. The inclusive, egalitarian classroom atmosphere and the integration of contemporary digital tools further emerged as shared strengths. While the teacher's role evolved over the duration of the course, one constant remained: their pivotal function as a bridge between institutional expectations, pedagogical goals, and student development. Notably, the role of mediator in this context departs from conventional cultural

interpretations; instead, mediation is conceptualized as a reflexive practice – a distinctive feature of this course.

Drawing on insights from dialogue with institutional authorities, as well as the perspectives of both learners and the teacher, several observations can be made about the overall course design. First, all three groups value the balance between theoretical learning and task-based practice, supported by a wide range of resources and the integration of advanced technologies and digital tools.

Second, the course and each topic within it follow a scaffolded progression, starting with foundational self-awareness and cultural understanding, then gradually moving toward more complex tasks involving critical reflection, cultural interpretation, and real-life intercultural engagement. Early in the course, sessions such as *The World Around Me* and *Culture and Diversity* introduce students to concepts of cultural identity, diversity, and positionality. These provide the necessary groundwork for students to begin exploring how their cultural lenses influence their perceptions of others. As the course progresses, it moves into applied intercultural communication through sessions like *Socializing and Interacting in International Events* and *Negotiating Meanings.* Crucially, the course integrates a strong critical component through thematic units such as *Stereotypes and Attitudes*, and *Does My Attitude Fall into a Stereotype*? These modules challenge students to interrogate cultural representations, reflect on internalized assumptions, and examine how power and ideology shape intercultural narratives. This critical engagement is further deepened through practical, interactive tasks such as *Say Something, Anything!* and *I Want Us to Be Friends*, which challenge students to apply their intercultural skills in emotionally complex and socially nuanced situations.

Third, throughout the course, a variety of pedagogical strategies like presentations, media analysis, experiential learning, alumni engagement, and collaborative tasks ensure that all components of intercultural competence, as identified by leading models (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), are addressed. Through this multifaceted approach, the course not only equips students with the practical skills necessary for intercultural interaction but also empowers them to engage across cultural boundaries with a reflective, ethical, and critically informed perspective.

6 Limitations

Although this study aimed to provide practical guidelines for educators and instructors in fostering a critical approach within L2 Japanese teaching and

learning, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small number of participants restricted the possibility of a more robust qualitative analysis. Future research should involve a larger and more diverse participant pool to allow for broader generalizations and deeper insights. Additionally, while this study focused specifically on the development of a critical perspective, it did not explore how this component interacts with other dimensions of intercultural competence, an area that warrants further investigation.

Learners' personal traits, life stories, and experiences also play a significant role in the development of various skills and competences. However, this aspect was not explored in the present study and should be considered a priority for future research.

7 Conclusion

The development and implementation of this course on critical intercultural competence reflect a careful integration of institutional expectations, pedagogical theory, and learner-centered practice. Grounded in a scaffolded design, the course moves progressively from foundational concepts of identity and cultural awareness to complex, critical engagement with intercultural issues through applied, interactive tasks. The inclusion of diverse materials, such as media texts, alumni narratives, and technology-enhanced activities, proved effective in deepening learners' critical reflection and engagement.

The program is characterized by a holistic approach that integrates language and culture through a structured pedagogical cycle: explicit instruction, discussion, reflection, further discussion, evaluation, and continued targeted teaching. One of its key strengths lies in the deliberate progression from theory to practice, which is essential for fostering critical intercultural competence and creating an inclusive, supportive learning environment. While the teacher adopts various roles throughout the course, two, in particular, set this program apart from similar initiatives: the role of mediator, fostering deep reflection, and that of a bridge connecting institutional expectations, pedagogical goals, and student development.

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Appendix 1

Name:

Date:

Today's Reflections

Have you read, watched, or heard anything related to today's topic? If so, what was it?

The most important idea/concept/surprizing thing I have learned today:

The questions/doubts I still have after the class: