



CULTURE-BASED JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

This community service program aimed to improve Japanese cultural literacy, pragmatic awareness, and communicative competence through a culture-based Japanese language education program. A participatory approach combining community education, training, educational advocacy, and an observational field visit to a Japanese work-culture training institute was employed. The main activity was conducted online on May 9, 2026 and attended by 142 participants, of whom 128 completed the post-activity evaluation questionnaire; quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were analyzed thematically. The materials covered *omotenashi*, *omoiyari*, indirect communication, *kuuki wo yomu*, Japanese workplace culture, and study and employment opportunities in Japan. The findings show a high level of participant satisfaction, with over 98% agreement on most indicators, and all participants recognized the importance of intercultural understanding in Japanese communication, although time-management aspects received more mixed feedback. The field visit further showed that internalization of workplace-culture practices such as *HouRenSou* depends heavily on a concrete motivational context. The study concludes that integrating cultural content into Japanese language education effectively strengthens intercultural competence and prepares participants for academic and professional interaction with Japanese society.

Keywords: *Japanese language; Japanese culture; intercultural communication; community service; cultural literacy*

INTRODUCTION

Foreign-language learning cannot be understood merely as the mastery of linguistic elements such as vocabulary and grammar; it also requires understanding how target-language speakers think, behave, and interact, since successful intercultural communication is determined not only by linguistic accuracy but also by the ability to understand the target language's cultural context. In Japanese specifically, language use is strongly shaped by social and cultural factors such as the *uchi-soto* (in-group/out-group) concept, *keigo* (honorific speech levels), and a general tendency toward *aimai hyōgen* (ambiguous, indirect expression); unfamiliarity with these aspects often causes miscommunication even when grammatical structure is technically correct. In the context of current partnership and community needs, the high level of Indonesian public interest in the Japanese language, driven by the popularity of Japanese popular culture (anime, manga, music) as well as growing opportunities for study, internship, and work in Japan through schemes such as the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) program, has not been matched by adequate cultural understanding.

Many learners acquire Japanese primarily through popular media dominated by informal registers or communication styles ill-suited to formal situations. As a result, many participants in educational programs and Indonesian workers in Japan experience pragmatic failure, communication breakdown caused by an inability to understand the target culture's pragmatic norms, face serious adaptation difficulties in academic and professional settings, and remain vulnerable to communication misunderstandings. This partner condition is what motivated the urgency of implementing the present community service activity.

In response to this situation, the present community service activity aimed to organize a “Culture-Based Japanese Language Education” program to improve the community/partners' contextual understanding of Japanese culture, build pragmatic awareness, and strengthen participants' readiness and competence for intercultural communication in academic and professional settings.

As an academic foundation, the state of the art shows that integrating culture into language learning is crucial. Broadly, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) explain that language and culture learning must be integrated because culture is embedded within language. In the specific Indonesian context, research by Yuniarsih, Noverisa, Rafli, and Setiadi (2023) demonstrated that integrating *ibunka rikai* (cross-cultural understanding) into Japanese language learning significantly improves students' understanding of language use across different cultural contexts. In addition, various prior community service reports based on seminars or workshops have likewise confirmed positive outcomes in boosting participants' cultural literacy and cross-cultural awareness.

Although the effectiveness of cultural integration has been widely studied, the scientific novelty of this community service article lies in its reconstruction of an educational model that does not merely present cultural material (*ibunka rikai*) as macro-level theoretical knowledge, but contextualizes it practically into micro-level Japanese sociocultural concepts, such as the politeness system (*keigo*), the *uchi-soto* concept, *omoiyari*, and the ability to read social situations (*kuuki wo yomu*), integrated directly with the pragmatic needs of prospective formal-sector workers and academics. This practical focus on mitigating pragmatic failure based on global workforce needs is what distinguishes this article from prior community service activities, which have generally been general and theoretical in nature.

Based on this background, the community service problem addressed in this activity is formulated as follows: how effective is the Culture-Based Japanese Language Education model in minimizing potential pragmatic failure and improving participants' readiness for intercultural communication? Accordingly, the hypothesis proposed is that providing Japanese language education that integrates Japanese sociocultural aspects contextually and systematically can significantly improve participants' pragmatic understanding and readiness for cross-cultural adaptation.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyze, evaluate, and describe the impact and achievement of the “Culture-Based Japanese Language Education” program organized by the Japanese Language Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, in addressing the partner community's limited cultural literacy.

Community empowerment in the modern practice of community service is no



longer viewed as a one-way process of charity or intervention, but as a systematic effort to enhance the critical capacity, independence, and bargaining position of partner communities. Theoretically, empowerment is rooted in repositioning the community's role from a mere object of development into an active subject that identifies its own problems and formulates solutions participatorily. Empowerment involves strengthening both individual capacity (human capital) and community social capital so that communities can adapt dynamically to global challenges, including intercultural communication and formal workplace professionalism. Contemporary empowerment models strongly emphasize participatory approaches through frameworks such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers, 1994) or Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), whose essence lies in leveraging local potential, whether human resources or existing institutional structures, to resolve critical issues sustainably. Empirical research by Endah (2020) confirms that social intervention programs designed by tapping local potential and involving the full participation of target groups exhibit substantially higher program adaptation success rates and are more likely to foster the partner's long-term independence.

Sustainable partnership education also requires a measurable training structure. Firman (2021), through a comprehensive review, explains that community-based intervention achieves its highest effectiveness when implemented through structured mentoring rather than a single mass-socialization event. Needs-based learning implemented in the form of interactive workshops has been shown to significantly narrow literacy or technical-competence gaps within partner communities.

In the specific dimension of competence strengthening (such as language mastery, work readiness, and cultural adaptation), empowerment is realized through synchronization between higher-education institutions and productive community groups. Research by Juwandi and Damanhuri (2024) shows that when an educational partnership program integrates contextual aspects with global needs, such as strengthening the competitive capacity of productive groups or prospective local workers, participants not only absorb new knowledge cognitively but also experience increased resilience and readiness for operational behavior in the field. This synergy aligns with the concept of downstream application of campus knowledge oriented directly toward solving real, global community problems.

METHOD

This community service (PkM) activity was implemented in partnership with Kelurahan Jatinegara Kaum, East Jakarta, and the Asosiasi Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Jepang Indonesia (ASPBII) Jabodetabek, using a participatory approach that positioned participants as active subjects in the learning process. This approach was chosen to encourage participant engagement in understanding the relationship between Japanese language and culture through discussion, reflection on experience, and the exchange of ideas throughout the activity. The activity was designed in three stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation.

The preparation stage began with identifying participants' needs regarding the understanding of Japanese language and culture. In this stage, the service team coordinated with partners, developed activity materials, determined resource persons, prepared learning media, and designed the evaluation instrument used to measure program effectiveness. The activity was also publicized to reach prospective participants from among students, teachers, lecturers, and members of the general public interested in Japanese language and culture.

The implementation stage was carried out through three main methods: community education, training, and educational advocacy. First, community education was delivered through an online seminar aimed at increasing participants' knowledge and awareness of the importance of cultural understanding in Japanese language learning. The first material was presented by Misaki Shinohara, M.Lin., who discussed the relationship between Japanese language and culture, highlighting the concepts of *omotenashi* (hospitality), *omoiyari* (empathy and consideration for others), indirect communication, and *kuuki wo yomu* (the ability to read social situations), delivered interactively with authentic examples illustrating the use of Japanese across various social and cultural contexts.

Second, training was conducted through case-study discussion and interactive dialogue that enabled participants to understand the application of Japanese cultural values in real communication situations. In this session, participants analyzed examples of cross-cultural communication, identified potential misunderstandings, and discussed communication strategies appropriate to Japanese cultural norms, aiming to build practical skills in grasping implicit meaning, communication etiquette, and language use appropriate to different social contexts.

Third, educational advocacy was carried out by providing information and guidance on study, internship, and work opportunities in Japan. The second material was presented by Yusuf Hidayat, S.S., who discussed Japanese workplace culture, the *HORENSO* communication system (*Houkoku, Renraku, and Soudan*), the 5S work principles (*Seiri, Seiton, Seiso, Seiketsu, and Shitsuke*), the importance of punctuality, and various official pathways for internship and employment programs in Japan, giving participants an understanding of the demands of Japanese work culture along with the adaptation strategies required to navigate a culturally different work environment.

The evaluation stage was carried out to measure the effectiveness of the activity and participants' level of understanding after completing the program, using an online questionnaire distributed to all participants after the activity concluded. The evaluation instrument comprised closed and open-ended questions covering participant satisfaction, understanding of the material, perceptions of the importance of intercultural communication, and participants' experiences interacting with Japanese people.

The activity was attended by 142 participants, of whom 128 completed the evaluation questionnaire and served as respondents in this study. Quantitative data obtained from closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to describe response tendencies, while qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed through data reduction, categorization, and identification of the main themes emerging from respondents' answers. The results of this analysis were used to evaluate program achievement and identify the activity's



impact on improving participants' cultural understanding and intercultural communicative competence.

As a complementary component of the program, the service team also conducted an observational field visit to LPK Kokoro no Siji, a Japanese-language and work-culture training institute in Sawangan, Depok, that prepares Indonesian trainees for internship and employment in Japan. The purpose of this visit was to examine, through direct observation and informal interviews with instructors, how the workplace-culture concepts introduced in the seminar, particularly *HouRenSou* (the extended reporting–contact–consultation practice) and the 5S principles, are implemented in an applied, real-world training environment, and to draw a comparative perspective between vocational and formal-school contexts for Japanese language education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The community service activity themed Culture-Based Japanese Language Education for Strengthening Communicative Competence was conducted online via Zoom Meeting on May 9, 2026. The activity lasted approximately three hours, beginning at 08:46 and ending at 11:52 (Western Indonesia Time). Its implementation forms part of the effort of the Japanese Language Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Jakarta, to strengthen the cultural literacy and intercultural communicative competence of the community of Japanese-language learners.

Public enthusiasm for the activity was reflected in the number of registrants, which reached 199 people, of whom 142 participants completed the activity. This relatively high participation rate indicates that Japanese culture remains an appealing topic for students, lecturers, teachers, and members of the general public interested in the Japanese language and culture.

The activity opened with a presentation on the relationship between Japanese language and culture by Misaki Shinohara, M.Lin., emphasizing the importance of cultural understanding in Japanese language use through the introduction of the concepts of *omotenashi* (hospitality), *omoiyari* (empathy for others), indirect communication, and *kuuki wo yomu*, or the ability to read social situations. The second material, presented by Yusuf Hidayat, S.S., addressed Japanese workplace culture, the *HORENSO* communication system, the 5S principles, workplace discipline, and various study, internship, and employment opportunities in Japan. The two materials complemented one another in providing a picture of Japanese language use in both social life and the working world.

Regarding participant characteristics, 128 participants completed the evaluation questionnaire used as the basis for the analysis of activity outcomes. Based on the data obtained, participants came from diverse academic backgrounds, dominated by 2024-cohort students (25.8%), followed by 2023-cohort students (23.4%), 2025-cohort students (18.8%), lecturers (9.4%), and 2022-cohort students (5.5%), with the remainder drawn from the general public.

In terms of international experience, the majority of respondents (71.9%) had

never visited Japan; 8.6% had visited once, and 19.5% had visited more than once. This finding indicates that most participants lacked direct experience interacting with Japanese people, making the cultural information provided in this activity highly relevant as a foundation for intercultural communication.

Regarding length of Japanese study, 40.2% of respondents had studied Japanese for 1–2 years, 30.7% for more than four years, 19.7% for 3–4 years, and 9.4% for less than one year. These data indicate that most participants already possessed a foundational knowledge of Japanese, allowing the culture-focused material to function as reinforcement of previously acquired communicative competence.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage (%)
Had never visited Japan	71.9
Had visited Japan once	8.6
Had visited Japan more than once	19.5
Studying Japanese for less than 1 year	9.4
Studying Japanese for 1–2 years	40.2
Studying Japanese for 3–4 years	19.7
Studying Japanese for more than 4 years	30.7

Program Implementation Evaluation

The evaluation results show that the activity received a very positive response from participants on most indicators, though satisfaction was not uniform across all aspects. A total of 98.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the activity was beneficial to them (50.0% agree, 48.4% strongly agree, 1.6% disagree somewhat), and a similarly high proportion (98.5%) rated the learning media used as helpful in understanding the material. However, the item on the time management and technical organization of the activity received a comparatively lower rating, with 74.3% agreeing or strongly agreeing (43.8% agree, 30.5% strongly agree) while 25.8% expressed some degree of disagreement (21.1% somewhat disagree, 4.7% disagree), indicating that logistical execution was an area participants felt could be improved even as the substantive content was very well received.

Participant satisfaction with the overall implementation of the activity was likewise very high, with 98.5% of respondents giving a positive rating. In addition, nearly all participants considered the material relevant to their needs, both in the context of Japanese language learning and preparation for study and work in Japan.

The evaluation results also indicate the activity's success in raising participants' cultural awareness: all respondents stated that, after participating, they understood the importance of cultural aspects in Japanese communication, indicating that the activity's principal objective, raising intercultural awareness, was achieved successfully.

**Table 2. Summary of Program Evaluation Results**

Indicator	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
The activity was beneficial	98.4
Learning media supported understanding of the material	98.5
Satisfaction with the implementation of the activity	98.5
The material was easy to understand	99.3
Understanding of the importance of culture in Japanese communication	100
Understanding of the concept of <i>omoiyari</i>	100
Awareness of the importance of Japanese work ethics	100
Insight into the Japanese working world	100
Relevance of the material to future needs	99.3

Overall, these results show that the activity was not only well received by participants but also succeeded in improving their understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and intercultural communication. Analysis of the open-ended responses provided a deeper picture of participants' experiences and perceptions. Of the 128 respondents, 36 reported having experienced misunderstandings when interacting with Japanese people, 73 reported never having experienced such misunderstandings, and 19 gave no response.

The misunderstandings experienced by participants generally stemmed from two main factors. The first was limited language proficiency, such as insufficient vocabulary (*kotoba*), pronunciation and accent errors, difficulty understanding kanji, regional dialectal differences (e.g., Osaka dialect), and errors in understanding work instructions. The second was differences in communication culture, for instance unfamiliarity with reading the situation (*kuuki wo yomu*), misunderstanding the meaning of conversational pauses (*ma*), overly direct refusals without the softening technique of *toomawashi*, missteps in applying *horenso* reporting norms, misreading the ambiguous phrase “*ii yo*,” and unfamiliarity with workplace etiquette such as reporting lateness by phone rather than by text message. These findings indicate that communication barriers stem not only from linguistic factors but also from differences in the value systems and cultural norms underlying language use.

The material that most interested participants was the concept of *omotenashi* and its historical and philosophical background, cited by 32 respondents as the most engaging topic, followed by Japanese workplace culture and work ethics such as discipline and punctuality (23 respondents) and the material delivered by Misaki Shinohara specifically (11 respondents). Participants also showed strong interest in *omoiyari* (9 respondents), indirect refusal via *toomawashi* (4 respondents), *kuuki wo yomu* (3 respondents), and the appropriate use of the expression “*ganbatte*” (2 respondents), while 7 respondents were most drawn to the practical material on internship and employment

pathways presented by Yusuf Hidayat. Eighteen respondents stated that all the material presented was engaging, citing new insights not previously obtained through formal Japanese language learning.

In terms of motivation, most participants stated that the activity increased their interest and enthusiasm for pursuing further study or work in Japan, with 33 respondents giving an affirmative response and 25 explicitly describing themselves as “very motivated.” A further seven respondents elaborated on renewed enthusiasm for learning Japanese and mental readiness for the Japanese workplace, while a small number gave more moderate or idiosyncratic responses, for instance framing their motivation as being for the benefit of their own students rather than themselves, or citing financial incentive as their primary driver. Information on workplace culture, professional ethics, and adaptation strategies in the Japanese environment was considered to provide a more realistic picture of academic and professional life in Japan.

Nonetheless, participants offered candid and constructive input for future improvement. Twenty respondents reported no shortcomings at all, but time management was the most frequently raised concern, cited by 26 respondents, who pointed to a late start, an overly long opening segment, and material sessions that felt rushed given the time available. A further 19 respondents raised concerns about professionalism and forum decorum, specifically noting that the opening segment felt at times like an informal reunion among certain organizers within the Zoom room, with cross-talk and personal conversation that interrupted the speakers and reduced the sense of academic formality; this finding, while less flattering, is reported here to give a balanced account of the evaluation and to inform concrete improvements to forum moderation in future iterations. Additional feedback concerned the need for interpretation or subtitles when the native-Japanese-speaking presenter spoke, technical issues such as unstable connections and audio interference, and requests for more applied content such as live *toomawashi* role-play simulations. A minority of respondents expressed a preference for an in-person format over the fully online format used in this activity.

Observational Findings from the Field Visit to LPK Kokoro no Siji

The field visit to LPK Kokoro no Siji provided a real-world illustration of how the workplace-culture concepts introduced in the seminar operate in practice. *HouRenSouKa* was found to be deeply institutionalized: educational posters explaining the concept and lists of required class equipment (*dogu*) were displayed throughout the hallways, stairwells, and classrooms, and a rotating class-duty (*piket*) system required a designated student to report to the instructor (*sensei*) every half hour before class began. These reports covered student attendance and reasons for absence, the number of mobile phones (*keitaidenwa*) collected prior to instruction, and the completion status of homework (*shukudai*) across the class. The 5S principles were likewise consistently internalized by students, evident not only in interactions with instructors but also when welcoming guests (*okyaku-san*) and in peer-to-peer interaction.

The visit also surfaced a notable challenge regarding the sustainability of *HouRenSou* habits once trainees depart for Japan. One instructor at the institute, referred to as Aji *Senpai*, who also has experience teaching Japanese in a public senior high school (SMA), observed that the concept of *HouRenSou* is largely unfamiliar in the SMA



environment, where Japanese is often treated as a residual elective subject rather than a focused professional competency; he further noted that his own habitual practice of *HouRenSou* weakened during periods of teaching in that less-reinforcing environment, only strengthening again upon returning to the LPK context. A comparative analysis attributed this difference primarily to motivational orientation: LPK trainees are driven by strong intrinsic and extrinsic motivation tied to a concrete goal of working and living in Japan, a motivation that correlates directly with their discipline and academic performance, whereas SMA students generally lack this near-term professional orientation, learning Japanese to fulfill a curriculum requirement rather than to pursue a specific career pathway. This comparison suggests that the successful internalization of Japanese workplace culture depends not only on exposure to the content itself but also on the presence of a concrete, motivationally salient context in which to apply it.

DISCUSSION

The results show that Japanese language education integrating cultural aspects can significantly improve participants' understanding of intercultural communication. The high level of participant satisfaction, together with increased awareness of the importance of culture in Japanese language use, indicates that the approach employed was well matched to participants' needs.

This finding supports the view of Kramsch (1998), who argues that language and culture are two inseparable elements. In foreign language learning, cultural understanding is an important factor in helping learners grasp the meaning embedded within language use. Through the introduction of the concepts of *omotenashi*, *omoiyari*, and *kuuki wo yomu*, participants gained a more comprehensive understanding of how Japanese people interact in daily life.

The activity's success in raising intercultural awareness also aligns with the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence proposed by Byram (1997), who argues that the ability to communicate across cultures is determined not only by language proficiency but also by the ability to understand differing cultural perspectives. The results of this activity show that participants began to understand the importance of considering cultural aspects when communicating in Japanese.

The finding regarding the causes of communication misunderstanding experienced by participants further reinforces Thomas's (1983) theory of pragmatic failure. Most of the misunderstandings experienced by participants were not caused by grammatical error, but by a mismatch between language use and the social and cultural norms of Japanese society, indicating that mastery of language structure alone is insufficient to guarantee successful intercultural communication.

These results also support the findings of Yuniarsih et al. (2023), who showed that integrating *ibunka rikai* into Japanese language learning can improve learners' communicative ability and cultural awareness. In this activity, participants not only gained knowledge of Japanese culture but also had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, understand potential communication barriers, and develop more effective adaptation

strategies.

The observational findings from LPK Kokoro no Siji reinforce this interpretation from a complementary, applied angle. Byram's (1997) argument that intercultural communicative competence depends on more than linguistic mastery is corroborated by the contrast between LPK and SMA trainees: exposure to the same workplace-culture content produced markedly different levels of internalization depending on whether learners had a concrete, motivationally salient context, an imminent departure for work in Japan, in which to apply it. Practices such as *HouRenSou* and 5S can further be understood through Hofstede's (2001) collectivism dimension, which characterizes Japanese society as prioritizing group harmony, mutual reporting, and shared responsibility over individual autonomy; the difficulty SMA students had internalizing these norms outside a clear group-oriented professional context illustrates how such collectivist workplace practices remain abstract without a setting that makes their communal function tangible. This suggests a practical implication for future programs: cultural content such as *omotenashi*, *omoiyari*, and *HouRenSouKa* is likely to be internalized more durably when paired with a tangible application context, rather than delivered as decontextualized knowledge alone.

Overall, the Culture-Based Japanese Language Education activity is shown to strengthen communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and participants' readiness to face academic and professional interaction with Japanese society. These findings indicate that cultural aspects need to be an integrated component of every Japanese language learning program and community service activity related to intercultural communication.

CONCLUSION

The Culture-Based Japanese Language Education community service activity succeeded in improving participants' understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and intercultural communication in the context of Japanese society. Material covering the concepts of *omotenashi*, *omoiyari*, *kuuki wo yomu*, *toomawashi*, and *horenso*, together with Japanese workplace culture, provided comprehensive insight into the sociocultural values underlying language use and social interaction in Japan. Beyond improving participants' knowledge of communication etiquette and workplace culture, the activity also offered a clearer picture of study, internship, and career opportunities in Japan, along with the adaptation challenges that may be encountered. Evaluation results show that the program received a very positive response and increased participants' motivation to pursue further study or work in Japan.

These findings reinforce the importance of integrating cultural aspects into Japanese language learning as a means of developing communicative competence and intercultural awareness. Nonetheless, the results also indicate that the potential for communication misunderstanding remains, arising from limitations in language proficiency and differences in cultural norms between Indonesian and Japanese society. Continued strengthening of language competence, balanced with sustained cultural understanding, is therefore needed to prepare Japanese language learners to adapt and communicate effectively in academic and professional environments in Japan.

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