

A Missed Opportunity for Raising Intercultural Awareness:

An Assessment of Two Intercultural Communication Textbooks

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Introduction

This paper presents an assessment of the approach used in two different textbooks to raising the intercultural awareness of young adult students of the English language. The two textbooks discussed in this paper are *J-Talk* and *Identity* both of which are published by Oxford University Press, and are commercially available in 2018. First, the paper will briefly discuss the role that cultural awareness plays within language teaching. Next, the paper will compare and contrast the two textbooks and describe the different approach to raising intercultural awareness taken by each textbook. Finally, there is a discussion of how the textbooks could be more effective at raising intercultural awareness in the students who use them. The paper will conclude by suggesting that the textbooks in question can increase intercultural awareness to a limited extent but that they will be unlikely to have a profound impact on the lives of the students who use them.

1. Relationship between Intercultural Awareness and Language Study in Japan

Reimann (2009)^[1], in a study of the cultural content of EFL materials available in Japan, defines raising cultural awareness as “any activity which actively seeks to engage learners and broaden their understanding, increase sensitivity and promote flexibility and tolerance of otherness and cultural diversity”. However, such an extremely broad definition can easily result in the cultural aspects of language teaching being overlooked. Byram and Wagner (2018)^[2] have written that educators are mistaken if they “assume that they automatically teach culture or even intercultural competence when they teach a language” and argue the case for languages being taught with the specific aim of developing intercultural competence. Due to the necessarily close relationship between language and culture, it is not surprising that many teachers will make the mistaken assumption identified by Byram and Wagner and there is a consequent need for teaching materials which specifically promote intercultural awareness.

In fact, language teaching in the inter-connected world of the 21st century has long evolved from the purely academic study of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, and there is a general recognition within language teaching that language exists within the context of culture and that an understanding of culture is of vital importance when communicating in a foreign language. However, in the case of the English language, this presents a dilemma for textbook publishers because of the many countries around the world in which English is the primary language. For example, if a textbook features British culture exclusively, it potentially limits the appeal of the textbook as a commercial product to language schools in the United Kingdom or to students in other countries who have a specific interest in Great Britain.

There is also the issue of the nationality of the language teacher; if a teacher from the United States is asked to use a textbook focusing on the culture of New Zealand, should the teacher in question be required to study unfamiliar cultural ideas, when his/her suitability for language teaching comes from being a native speaker of English? Indeed, Matsuo (2012)^[3] argues that a teacher should focus on exploiting their own identity as an intercultural communicator and that a focus on national cultures deflects attention away from this.

Another aspect to this issue is the concept of “world Englishes” as spoken by people all over the world for which

the goal is intercultural communication rather than the achievement of native-speaker authenticity. If the goal for a textbook is to teach English as an international language which can be used to facilitate successful communication between people of different cultures, the choice of any individual culture for use as an example could be interpreted either as completely arbitrary, or as demonstrating a bias towards the traditional foci of English language textbooks, the U.K. or the U.S.A.

In spite of these difficulties, Hollenback (2016)^[4] reflects that teaching materials for EFL have made increasing use of cultural elements in order to “better prepare students for (these) intercultural situations”. If this is indeed the case, it is worthwhile considering how effective a textbook will be at achieving this goal. This paper will propose that it is unsatisfactory for an English language textbook to present the issues and challenges of intercultural communication without stimulating students to go out of the classroom and experience the variety of global culture through direct and personal interaction with people from different cultures.

2. Textbooks Under Consideration

This paper focuses on two textbooks which explore topics relating to intercultural awareness and communication, both of which are published by Oxford University Press. Both textbooks analyzed in this study were published in the early years of the 21st century and were commercially available for purchase in 2018. In order of publication, the two textbooks are: *J-Talk: Conversation Across Cultures*^[5], first published in 2000, and *Identity*^[6], first published in 2004. Interestingly, neither of the two textbooks specifically describes itself as a textbook for intercultural communication. Unlike other textbooks in the EFL field which commonly use the expression “intercultural communication” in the title (for example *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (1995)^[7], *Intercultural Communication for English Learners in Japan* (2017)^[8], and *Speaking of Intercultural Communication* (2017)^[9]), *J-Talk* and *Identity* both avoid doing so, possibly because neither textbook wishes to identify itself so strongly with the intercultural communication genre. There is a niche for textbooks covering intercultural communication within the domestic Japanese market for EFL materials and these textbooks are designed primarily for use in EFL classes within general education courses at Japanese universities and other tertiary educational establishments. The majority of such textbooks are published by Japanese publishing companies and are specifically aimed at, and produced for, the domestic Japanese market. Another factor in the avoidance by *J-Talk* and *Identity* of the words “intercultural communication” could be that they are published by global textbook publisher Oxford University Press and it may be an attempt to distance the two textbooks from textbooks produced by Japanese publishers, notwithstanding the fact that *J-Talk* is unambiguously aimed at, and designed for, Japanese learners of English.

Although neither *J-Talk* nor *Identity* uses the expression “intercultural communication” in its title, an examination of the contents page of both textbooks reveals topics which, in the case of *J-Talk*, vaguely hint at intercultural communication and, in the case of *Identity* are unambiguously focused on intercultural communication. Both textbooks introduce topics relating to differences in communication styles which exist between cultures with the intention of using the medium of English to develop awareness of other cultures and increase competence in intercultural communication.

The next section of this paper will explore the similarities between the two textbooks.

2-1 Comparison of *J-Talk* and *Identity*

J-Talk and *Identity* are both textbooks published by Oxford University Press and targeted at the Japanese EFL market. Both textbooks would be suitable for use in general education English classes for first year students at a Japanese university. As mentioned above, neither textbook explicitly describes itself as a textbook for intercultural communication. However, there are strong indications to indicate that the market positioning for both textbooks is within the intercultural communication niche. The secondary title for *J-Talk* is “Conversation Across Cultures” which is synonymous with intercultural communication and the introduction to *J-Talk* states that the textbook is “designed to provide students with the opportunity to share personal opinions and ideas as they examine the customs, practices, and values of Japan and other countries”. In the case of *Identity*, the “Letter to Student”, which serves as the introduction to the textbook, explains that “learning English will help you communicate with people from other countries” but that “if

you need to do business or live abroad, you will also need to have a deeper knowledge of the culture you are visiting”. Both textbooks are therefore specific in their focus on intercultural awareness and communication rather than the study of the English language.

Neither textbook provides grammar exercises, nor any other explicit instruction in the English language. Both textbooks provide a word list for each unit with key vocabulary, however the definitions for the words in the vocabulary lists in *Identity* are given in English, whereas *J-Talk* provides Japanese translations with no English definitions. *J-Talk* is aimed at “pre-intermediate to intermediate” learners of English so it would appear that the word list in *J-Talk* is provided to help students understand the English used in the textbook, whereas the glossary in *Identity* is provided to improve the English ability of students. *Identity* does not provide any English language training at all, while each unit of *J-Talk* ends with two pages of exercises in a section called “On Your Own” which are suitable, either for individual work in class, or for assignment as a homework task. However, these exercises are puzzles or quizzes and are designed for practicing the English vocabulary learned in the unit, rather than being instructional in any other way.

This being the case, both *J-Talk* and *Identity* belong firmly to the genre of textbooks which prioritize intercultural awareness rather than teaching the English language. Both textbooks provide plentiful opportunities for practicing English, however, beyond providing templates for conversation and topics for discussion they do little else to improve the English ability of their users. The next section of this paper will examine the major differences between the two textbooks in terms of style and content.

2-2 Contrasting the Style and Content of *J-Talk* and *Identity*

J-Talk is specifically designed for Japanese students and would be unsuitable for use in a classroom in which neither the students nor the teacher have had any experience of living in Japan. *Identity* is much more international in focus and could be used with a class of students of mixed-nationalities in Japan, or for a class of non-Japanese students in any country.

2-2-1 *J-Talk*

J-Talk was published in 2000, and in the introduction is described as a “speaking and listening course for pre-intermediate and intermediate Japanese learners of English”. This positive assertion of the nationality of the students for whom the textbook is intended immediately sets *J-Talk* apart from most other textbooks produced by international publishers which are designed to be suitable for students of any nationality. It is natural for international publishers of textbooks to try to meet the demands of the global market for EFL materials but, by concentrating on Japan, *J-Talk* is distinctive, and it is the assumption that students using the textbook will be Japanese that accounts for the textbook’s “Japan First” approach to raising cultural awareness.

Every unit of *J-Talk* covers six pages; in each unit, the first double-page spread is called “Exploring the Topic” and introduces the topic from a completely Japanese perspective. The cultural examples described are concepts which will be familiar to Japanese students, and each “Exploring the Topic” activity is illustrated with photographs taken in Japan of Japanese people or Japanese products. In addition, the names of people used in the example conversations are all Japanese. The sole exception to this trend of referencing only Japanese people in each “Exploring the Topic” section is the unit called “That’s Shocking” which gives examples of cultural faux-pas made by foreign people during a visit to Japan.

It is only in the middle two pages of each six-page unit that the perspective moves away from Japan to introduce cultural ideas relevant to the topic from different countries around the world. Following on from “Exploring the Topic”, the middle two pages are given the title “Across Cultures” and start with a listening activity in which people from a wide variety of countries give examples from their own culture in English. To express this in a different way, one third of the content of *J-Talk* is solely concerned with Japanese culture, only one third introduces examples from different countries or cultures, and one third of the content is vocabulary-based language practice. Speakers from a total of thirty-one different countries are used in the “Across Cultures” sections with some of the examples coming from countries such as Tahiti, Ghana, or Laos, with which students are unlikely to be familiar.

The unit topics in *J-Talk* are more accessible to lower-level learners and, as explained above, all of them start out by

examining the culture of Japan first. Each unit is given a headline-style title but in terms of content the twelve units cover the following topics: 1. Culture and names, 2. Body language, greetings and gestures, 3. Possessions and cultural values, 4. Drinks in different cultures, 5. Festivals and ceremonies, 6. Dating, 7. Working in different cultures, 8. Gift giving, 9. Food and culture, 10. Fashion and beauty, 11. Cultural faux-pas, 12. TV and culture.

2-2-2 Identity

Identity was published in 2004 and has broader, more academic, unit topics than *J-Talk*, befitting its target of high-level beginners or intermediate students. The focus for English language skills training is on practicing listening and speaking skills. *Identity* describes itself as being suitable for “Asian young-adult learners” which can be interpreted as a non-discriminatory expression for students in higher education. In addition to providing opportunities for listening to, and speaking, the English language, the goal of *Identity* is to allow learners to “reflect on their own cultural identities and consider alternate views”.

The unit topics in *Identity* cover the sort of topics frequently to be found in the intercultural communication textbooks produced by Japanese publishing companies. The units in *Identity* cover the following topics: 1. Identity, 2. Values, 3. Culture Shock, 4. Culture in Language, 5. Body Language and Customs, 6. Individualism, 7. Politeness, 8. Communication Styles, 9. Gender and Culture, 10. Diversity, 11. Social Change, 12. Global Community. Each unit starts with a reading comprehension (for which audio is available) section called “Find Out”. Speakers from two or three countries, from a total pool of 15 different countries, make brief first-person comments about the topic. The reading is followed by five comprehension questions and then a pair work exercise for conversation in which students respond to the comments made by the speakers.

The second section in each unit in *Identity* is called “Focus In” and it is this section which defines the textbook’s approach to raising intercultural awareness. In each unit this section starts with a questionnaire-style survey designed to help students tackle the difficult task of giving consideration to their own identity and their own cultural values. The students are asked to consider their response to (usually six) closed, yes/no, questions, and to make a choice from a selection of choices all of which are variations on a positive, neutral, or negative combination. Once answer choices have been selected, students add up their total to provide them with a rough guide to how they feel about the topic and this assessment can then be used as a basis for further discussion. After having completed the survey individually, students ask each other the questions from the survey as a pair work exercise while being encouraged to develop the positive, neutral, or negative answer choices with further explanation, extra information and personal examples.

On the third page of each four-page unit, there is a two-stage listening comprehension activity called “Listen In” in which students listen to speakers, from a total pool of 13 different countries, who give additional information relating to the unit topic and how it applies to their country or culture. Students listen once for the gist and then listen a second time in order to answer questions relating to specific information. This is followed by a pair work exercise in which students use a directed conversation to tell each other their ideas relating to the topic.

The final page for each unit is called “Find Out More” and is another reading comprehension exercise, although, once again, audio is available. In the majority of cases the “Find Out More” section introduces a different internationalist who presents their opinion on the topic. After completing five questions to check understanding, each unit finishes with yet another pair work conversation task for further discussion and expansion of the topic.

It can be seen that *Identity* has a strong focus on pair work with opportunities for conversation incorporated in four places in each unit. At times the conversations are structured with students being offered choices as prompts, but the structured conversation prompts usually end with an instruction to students to talk freely, using examples from their own experience. *Identity*, therefore is somewhat reliant on the ability of students to be in command of English skills which enable them to develop a conversation after having been given a prompt.

3. Different Approaches to Raising Intercultural Awareness

This chapter will discuss the different approaches to raising intercultural awareness adopted by the two textbooks. In some respects, the approach taken by the two textbooks is similar. Both textbooks introduce some of the topics which

can cause friction and difficulties in intercultural communication and by demonstrating that differences exist between cultures, it can be said that students have become more culturally aware. Simply by having their knowledge of the kaleidoscope of world culture increased it will make students less inclined to be astonished when they encounter a person from another culture who does not behave in the same way that they do.

The “Japan First” approach by *J-Talk* is novel because it reinforces recognition of students’ own culture in advance of learning about other cultures. It could be argued that learning how people behave in another culture is sufficient stimulus for self-reflection about what happens in one’s own culture, however this is not necessarily the case. Unless students are specifically directed to think about the behaviour of Japanese people they may miss out on making comparisons to their own culture. The “Japan First” approach is therefore effective, especially for pre-intermediate learners of English, because it deals with familiar material rather than abstract concepts. Students are therefore more likely to be able to try talking about intercultural ideas in English.

In the case of *Identity*, the approach is almost completely international although in one or two places a slight bias towards Japan can be detected. This occurs in places where it seems that the writers of *Identity* use Japan as a default position and are comparing Japan with the rest of the world. However, in comparison with *J-Talk* there are fewer references to Japan and some units do not mention Japan or Japanese culture at all. The differentiation in the approach of *Identity* to raising intercultural awareness is in the use of a self-exploration survey in every chapter.

As mentioned above, the method for raising intercultural awareness in *J-Talk* can be described as a “Japan first” approach. *Identity* tries to increase students’ intercultural awareness by adopting a “self-awareness first” approach. *J-Talk* asks students to use English to consider Japanese culture first, before learning about other diverse cultural viewpoints and then making connections between those other cultural viewpoints and Japan. *Identity* is focused on the individual student, and approaches intercultural awareness by enabling the student to recognize and articulate his/her views on a subject. This is effective because students of all abilities rarely spend a significant amount of time reflecting on how they feel about their own culture and few will have more than a vague understanding of the influence that their culture has on their way of thinking. The self-exploration surveys in *Identity* allow students to understand their own feelings better and this, in turn, helps them to express their feelings when confronted by ideas from a culture which is different to their own.

4. What More Could Be Done?

Although *J-Talk* and *Identity* are attractive textbooks and well-suited to English courses, they are both reluctant to push students beyond the boundaries of structured activities and out of the classroom. Both textbooks can be described as increasing intercultural awareness simply from the fact that they provide examples of various aspects of intercultural communication problems and examples of how Japan, and Japanese people’s behaviour, is different to that of people from other countries. The two textbooks can be likened to a window through which students are made aware of the way in which values, customs, and manners are different around the world, but the textbooks present no challenge to students to break the glass in the window and experience these differences for themselves.

Undoubtedly, the Japan First approach of *J-Talk*, or the self-exploration surveys of *Identity*, make student participation easier, because the majority of students will not have benefitted from prolonged exposure to another culture, either through long-term residence overseas, or deep friendships with people from a different cultural background. However, in 2018, every campus in Japan has resident students from other countries whom Japanese students should be encouraged to contact. At the very least, the recent increase in inbound tourism to Japan should mean that almost all students will have had the experience of noticing the behaviour of foreign visitors and those experiences could be used as a foundation for discussion about culture.

This reluctance by both textbooks to encourage students to be active in intercultural communication exposes *J-Talk* and *Identity* as existing for the purpose of providing topics for discussion in classes for which the primary goal is to practice and improve competency in the English language rather than raising intercultural awareness. *Identity* has the potential to be used in a class comprising a mix of students from a variety of backgrounds, but even under such conditions not enough motivation is provided within the textbook activities to encourage students to investigate cultural

differences for themselves.

5. Conclusion

As Byram and Wagner (2018)^[2] have stated “knowing and understanding other people and societies involves knowledge and understanding of oneself and one’s own society”. That being the case, it could be argued that the “Japan first” or “thinking about your own society first” approach of *J-Talk* and the “self-awareness first” or “understanding of oneself” approach of *Identity* should mean that both textbooks are successful at increasing intercultural awareness and intercultural communication in the students who use them. The problem lies in the reality that both *J-Talk* and *Identity* are a compromise between providing an opportunity to practice using the English language and an opportunity for gaining knowledge about culture in different countries.

Rogers et al. (2002)^[10], when discussing Edward Hall’s approach to intercultural awareness, say that, “Hall insisted that a learner had to do intercultural communication, not just talk about it”. This is the point upon which the intercultural intentions of *J-Talk* and *Identity* fall short of having a significant impact. Learners and teachers using the textbooks will probably enjoy using them and the textbooks certainly provide students with opportunities to practice using English while discussing topics which will interest them. Furthermore, exposure to the textbooks should also mean that students become more culturally aware. However, *J-Talk* and *Identity* both fail to challenge students to become active in intercultural communication for themselves and this means that the different approaches to raising intercultural awareness taken by the two textbooks are unlikely to have a long-lasting impact on their users.

This represents a missed opportunity for raising students’ intercultural awareness in a meaningful way. Every unit in both textbooks could have been ended by a single sentence summary of the cultural issue highlighted by the topic, with a call to action for students to talk to someone from a different culture about the matter in question. Such a challenge will help Japanese students to overcome any hesitation they may feel about talking to people from a different culture and it is to be hoped that this kind of component is included in future textbooks.

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概要

異文化に関する意識向上の好機を逃す事例：2冊の異文化コミュニケーションテキストの評価

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本稿では、オックスフォード大学出版局から出版された異文化理解テキストの調査を報告する。調査対象の2冊のテキストは異文化理解をテーマにした大学のEFL授業で活用することを目的とし2018年に販売されているテキストである。はじめに異文化理解と言語学習の関係を説明する。次に、本稿で調査するテキストの共通点と相違点を説明し、テキストに最も取り上げられている課題のアプローチを比較する。最後に調査したテキストを総合的に評価し、学生の異文化理解向上につながる改善案を述べる。

キーワード：異文化コミュニケーション、英語教育、国際理解教育
