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## *Articles*

- **A Case of (Mistaken?) Identity: The Authorship Controversy Surrounding the Sherlock Holmes Canon** 7  
Jeroen Bode
- **Recollections of a Jewish-German Businessman in Early Shōwa Japan** 14  
Christian W. Spang

## *Language Learning and Teaching*

- **Using Blog-Based Communication to Prepare for Study Abroad** 32  
Kiyomi Fujii
- **Content and Language-Integrated Learning and English as a Medium of Instruction** 38  
Gavin O'Neill
- **Lifelong English Learning Motivation and Identity: A Case Study** 46  
Shinichi Nagata

## *Special Section: Teaching Ideas from OkiJALT*

- **Teaching Pronunciation of the “S” Morpheme** 53  
George Robert MacLean
- **Where Should I Go? Encouraging Learners to Put Their Place into Learning** 57  
Kurt Ackermann
- **Thoughts on Vocabulary, Internationalization, and Culture** 61  
Tokuya Uza
- **A Communicative Way to Teach Article Use** 64  
Michael Bradley
- **Utilizing the Pecha-Kucha Format for Presentation Activities** 67  
Norman Fewell
- **Aprendizaje y Fijación de los Verbos Regulares en Español: Una Idea Más** 70  
Fernando Kohatsu
- **“Welcome to Nago” Website: A Sophomore English Writing Project** 72  
Meghan Kuckelman
- **A Focus on Functional Language** 75  
Tokuya Uza
- **Psychological Considerations in Teaching** 79  
Timothy Kelly

## *Technology*

- **What Are My Students Thinking? Setting Up an Online Survey to Gather Student Feedback** 84  
Brent Wright
- **The Text-to-Speech Function** 88  
George Robert MacLean

*Special Section:  
Lessons from OkiJALT*



# Thoughts on Vocabulary, Internationalization, and Culture

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These days, a lot of people are in environments where one can receive a variety of information via the Internet, television, radio, movies and other media. This availability of information is a great advantage of today's technology. On the other hand, the problem is how to use the information one receives. It is extremely simple to just emulate the received information, but it may not have a good effect on those who use it without truly understanding the meaning behind the words or the information. Therefore critical thinking and cultural awareness are essential components to be taught in language classes in Japan.

The Olympic games will be held in Japan in 2020. With this in mind, as an immediate goal, it is desirable to foster multicultural multilingual citizens who can effectively represent Japan at an international level.

There is unfortunately a misconception in many Japanese contexts that becoming international means losing one's Japanese identity. Okinawa is likely the place where the most contact between Japanese and foreigners occurs, and thus I will refer to the case of M. Kelly as an example that refutes this notion.

Kelly (1991), from Okinawa Japan, explains through her experience becoming bilingual and bicultural that marrying an American did not mean that she lost her first language (L1) cultural identity. Her identity as an Okinawan did not change. According to Kelly, one must first of all possess a strong sense of heritage. In her case, she is Okinawan. She explains that from there, one can be receptive to and adapt to other cultural values: In order to become a truly bilingual and bicultural person an individual must possess pride in their own culture and

nationality. Thereafter, they may adapt to another culture and supplement their primary L1 culture.

By possessing a strong sense of heritage, it becomes possible to enhance one's academic achievement in a diverse cultural environment (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996; Kleinfeld, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

As an example, when a Japanese teacher teaches the Japanese language to American students, the teacher must overcome the barrier of being from a different culture. In such cases, the most important element is to articulate and illustrate how each culture expresses various values. Students need to be aware that difficulties may occur because of differences due to cultural misunderstandings. If this happens, it is helpful when one is secure about one's primary culture (Yamazato, 1991). This essentially means that one must retain and value one's cultural identity and avoid negative cultural schismogenesis (Erickson, 1987). Emulating and uncritically adopting other languages without understanding the meaning behind the words and the cultural underpinnings they entail can cause a person to lose respect and understanding of their own culture. This has been the case for numerous civilizations and it results in an immense loss in the form of moribund or declining languages, such as those of Okinawa in the current age. There exists a certain responsibility for parents to 'pass on' values and also language to the next generation.

Particularly in a mass media world that is saturated by western values, it is possible for emerging generations to lose perspective about their own culture and its value. According to Tanaka, Higuchi, Iemura, Igarashi, Shimomiya, and Tanaka (1994), younger generations characteristically tend to create a new range of vocabulary, which is a central way for them to distinguish and define

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themselves. Often, foreign words are considered as being “cool”. For example, approximately ten years ago, the word respect was used frequently among many younger people in Japan. The direct translation of the word respect is 尊敬 (*sonkei*) in Japanese, and it means exactly the same in English.

However, the content of the meaning has different nuances. Japanese *sonkei* has numerous other implications. It is possible (and even likely) according to the research cited thus far that, for example, using the word respect for the purpose of being “cool” can lead to a decline in the significance of the fundamental meaning of *sonkei* in Japanese.

Vocabulary and culture are intricately entwined even in one’s own language. When people misuse words, it can detract from the primary (and respectful) meaning of cultural concepts, and diminish their impact and significance for future generations. As another example, the word おもてなし (*omotenashi*), meaning hospitality, has become a common word in Japan and a lot of people used it lightly by just ‘parroting’ the phrase without any sense of the underlying meaning of the word.

Using the word おもてなし (hospitality) without understanding its real meaning reduces the value of the word and this can also contribute to dilution of its fundamental cultural value. According to Genjiro’s English translation (2013), *omotenashi* is a complex word that includes generosity, modesty, and similar meanings, whereas it has been spoken rather perfunctorily at times in popular parlance when it is used without proper attention to its cultural origin.

In the case of Japanese people, our ancestors have bequeathed us a vast lexis that one hopes we can retain in our hearts despite the pace of ultra-modern Japanese society today. One of the beauties of Japanese culture is its vibrancy and its ability to adapt to a modern world – all the while retaining its fundamental cultural values.

It is important for Japanese teachers of English to make sure to teach not only the English language, but also to teach the differences in how cultural values are expressed. The most important element in teaching the English language in Japan is to

teach students not to forget that they are Japanese. Without understanding one’s own culture and language, how can one learn another culture and language? Losing one’s cultural values is akin to when a library burns down: Incalculable loss of knowledge and culture occurs.

Japan is experiencing rapid cultural change and aspiring to become more international with such events as the 2020 Olympics. With all this in mind, it is desirable for Japanese people to embrace international culture but to also honour, retain, and foster their own identity while integrating into an international (global) society.

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