



# A cross-cultural investigation of effective language pedagogy in teachers' personal practical knowledge narratives: a cultural-ecological perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The current case study probes two international language teachers' perspectives on the role culture plays in their perception of an effective language pedagogy through their personal practical knowledge narratives from a cultural ecological standpoint. To do this, two language teachers from two different cultural backgrounds (Iran and Japan) were asked to write a narrative about an effective class they had taught and how culture had influenced it. These narratives were read carefully and became the basis of three 60-minute semi-structured narrative interviews. Both narratives and interview data were analysed using a thematic analysis based in a cultural ecological perspective. The study contributes to the literature on culturally informed education by recognising culture as a distinctive factor affecting learning in different layers of the cultural ecology and can inform a culture-specific, nativized teacher education programme.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 October 2023

Accepted 2 May 2024

## KEYWORDS

Case study; personal practical knowledge; narrative inquiry; culture

## Introduction

Personal Practical Knowledge (henceforth PPK) has long been discussed in the literature as a part of the teachers' knowledge (Connelly and Dienes 1982) and one of the critical tools to delve into this valuable knowledge is narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin 1986). When teachers narrate their stories about their experiences of success or failure in a classroom, they reveal undiscovered layers of their underlying social, cultural, political, and ideological beliefs; ones that are not easy to discover. One of these underpinning understandings is cultural understanding which can inform teachers' practice and have a direct impact on students' learning (King, Song, and Child 2023).

Despite the importance of teachers' PPK in designing and implementing lessons, little is known about the nature and characteristics of this knowledge, particularly from an intercultural perspective. Most of the research in this area has been conducted in Western contexts (Debnam et al. 2023; Golombek 1998; Sjøen 2023) with little attention paid to the unique cultural characteristics of other regions. Recognising the diverse cultural characteristics inherent in Eastern and Western education systems, including elements like didactic teaching approaches (Tan and Chua 2015), the promotion of critical thinking

(Lun, Fischer, and Ward 2010), student engagement (Lam et al. 2016), and attitudes towards confrontation (Jones 2001), highlights the rationale of conducting this research. Against this background, there is a need for research that explores teachers' PPK from an intercultural Eastern perspective.

Educational ecology (Bronfenbrenner 1993; van Lier 2004) is an underlying theoretical framework of the present study. Such a framework can add to the study's significance showing that culture can be manifested in different layers of an ecosystem and exert its fundamental impact on this complex phenomenon adding the cultural aspect to it. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of teachers' PPK from a cross-cultural perspective based in the Eastern world, i.e., Iran and Japan, from a cultural ecological standpoint.

## Literature review

### *Personal Practical Knowledge (PPK)*

Teaching is a complex process that involves various factors such as content, methodology, students' characteristics, and the teacher's knowledge. One of the teachers' forms of knowledge is PPK. The concept of teachers' PPK was first introduced by Connelly and Dienes (1982) who argued that professionals, including teachers, do not simply apply technical rationality in their practice, but also draw on their knowing, which includes their experiences, beliefs, and values (Connelly and Clandinin 1986). They described PPK as a form of 'knowing-in-action' that is tacit, intuitive, and context-specific. Since then, the concept of teachers' PPK has been further developed and studied in the field of education.

PPK is a concept that has been discussed in the education literature for many years (Clandinin 2019; Golombek 1998; Willinsky 2014). It is often described as the tacit knowledge that teachers acquire through their experiences and interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader community. This knowledge is often grounded in context and is shaped by a range of factors, including cultural background, personal beliefs, and prior experiences. PPK is considered an essential component of effective teaching, as it allows teachers to make informed decisions and adapt their teaching to meet the needs of their students (Connelly, Clandinin, and He 1997). Researchers have argued that PPK is particularly important for teachers who work with diverse student populations as it allows them to navigate the complexities of cultural and linguistic differences and tailor their teaching strategies to meet the needs of each student (Van Tartwijk et al. 2009).

One of the most examined ways of exploring teachers' PPK is narratives. Narrative inquiry is a line of research in qualitative research in which the stories are told and, based on them, meaning is constructed. Barkhuizen (2016), in an attempt to describe narrative inquiries, stated that 'experiences become narratives when we tell them to an audience and narratives become part of narrative inquiry when they are examined for research purposes or generated to report the findings of an inquiry' (4). Narrative inquiry is a valuable tool to investigate underlying beliefs specifically in under-researched areas. For instance, it can highlight the experiences of marginalised groups by expanding the range of voices heard in research (Hayes 2013). An interest in narrative is rooted in the philosophy of involvement and empowerment of the people whose experiences are the research subjects (Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik 2013).

### *Cultural ecological perspective*

Ecology as an interconnected complex concept defines different layers of an ecosystem in describing a phenomenon. This concept was brought into education by Bronfenbrenner, (1993) who assigned it four layers: micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-system. Since then, educational ecology has been used by different scholars to understand different educational phenomena such as leadership (Shah 2023), online education (Ramirez, Lafford, and Wermers 2021), language policy (Hornberger 2002), teacher education (Kamali and Nazari 2023), and teacher identity (Nazari, Karimi, and De Costa 2023).

Bronfenbrenner, (1993) posited four hierarchical layers for educational ecology. The first layer asserts that ‘a microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 15) and deals with a developing person’s immediate context; a classroom in our study. The second layer, i.e., a mesosystem, ‘comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person’ (15); that is, it deals with institutional factors such as colleagues and students who are believed to promote a variety of learning outcomes (Boud 2014). The third layer, an ecosystem, includes ‘the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings at least one of them does not contain the developing person’ (24). Finally, ‘a macrosystem consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and ecosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure’ (25). This study adopted and adapted this framework to investigate the role of culture in language classrooms.

In addition, the cultural-ecological perspective is a holistic approach highlighting the complex relationship between culture and the environment. It holds that humans are deeply influenced by their surroundings and also shape their environments through cultural practices and behaviours (Ogbu 1981). The cultural ecological perspective emphasises that understanding the issue that how cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices impact ecological systems and sustainability is necessary. By recognising the interplay between culture and ecology, it becomes possible to develop more efficient strategies for effective education and permanent development by respecting and integrating diverse cultural values and practices (Eldering 1997).

Against this background, the significance of this framework for this study is twofold. First, a cultural-ecological framework allows for a thorough examination of how cultural factors interact with various levels of the educational system, from the individual classroom (micro level) to broader societal influences (macro level). This holistic approach enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between culture and pedagogy. Second, by considering the cultural context within which teaching and learning occur, researchers can uncover insights that are specific to particular cultural settings. This can aid the current study whose method is comparative in which pedagogy in two distinct cultures is culturally explored and compared. Overall, combining culture with educational ecology this study introduces a novel framework to be employed for exploring the role of culture as perceived by teachers in effective pedagogy in three different layers namely micro, meso, and macro-cultural ecologies.

## Culture

Culture plays a critical role in education as it significantly influences how individuals learn, perceive, and approach knowledge (Bruner 1997). Education systems are often designed and delivered within cultural contexts which shape, not only what is taught, but also how it is taught, who is teaching, and who is learning thereby taking cultural identity into account (Altugan 2015). With the emergence of technology and social media, culture has assumed new roles (Willis, Yamamura, and Rappleye 2009) prompting a recent surge in attention towards digital culture (Thumim 2012; Wu et al. 2023; Zuboff 2019). Therefore, understanding and addressing the role of culture and its new roles in education is essential for creating effective and culturally responsive teaching practices that support the learning and academic success of all students.

Culture is also a critical factor in shaping teachers' PPK. The concept of culture can be vast. 'Big C' Culture refers to the dominant cultural traditions, practices, and values of a society, typically associated with high culture or mainstream culture. It includes things like literature, art, music, theatre, and other forms of cultural expression that are generally considered to be of high artistic or intellectual value. In contrast, 'small c' culture refers to the everyday cultural practices and traditions of ordinary people, including their beliefs, customs, and behaviours. It encompasses things like fashion, food, language, folklore, and other aspects of everyday life that are often overlooked or undervalued (Williams 1983). Although scholars differentiate between these types of culture, the literature recognises the enhanced effectiveness achieved through integrating both types to support learning (Bell 2020; Kramsch, De Bot, and Ginsberg 1991; Shih 2015). Culture can evoke a sense of pride (Bartleet 2016) or belonging (Ibrahim et al. 2016) in individuals and its peculiarities such as schema-triggering activities have proved to be influential in educational settings. Cultural diversity was also found to have a positive impact on learning (Sharifian 2017). Research has shown that cross-cultural communication has some benefits for teachers and students including (for example) increasing cultural awareness and understanding, and improving communication skills (Young and Schartner 2014). Teachers who embrace multiculturalism and engage in culturally responsive teaching practices are more effective at supporting the academic success of their diverse students (Florio-Ruane and DeTar 2001). One way that culturally responsive pedagogy can impact teachers' PPK is by challenging their assumptions and biases. By engaging in this type of education and reflecting on their own PPK, teachers become more critical and aware of these biases and work to overcome them (Kamali 2024; Smith 2011).

Culture plays a fundamental role in shaping and influencing a teacher's PPK (Connelly, Clandinin, and He 1997). Cultural norms dictate communication styles, classroom management strategies, and the choice of instructional methods (Dahlgren 2015). For instance, in some cultures, there may be a strong emphasis on respect for authority, which influences a teacher's approach to classroom dynamics. Additionally, cultural differences may shape attitudes towards competitiveness versus cooperation (Houston et al. 2005). Through these complex relationships and attitudes, teachers develop a set of practices that are in line with the cultural norms and expectations of their educational environment.

Furthermore, culture can influence the underlying aspects of education beyond the classroom, such as educational philosophy. Teachers may adopt (unconsciously) societal

values regarding the purpose of education, the role of discipline, and the desired outcomes for students (Butera et al. 2021). These cultural underpinnings become embedded in their PPK, guiding decision-making processes, and shaping their overall approach to teaching and learning. As a result, perceiving the complex link between culture and teacher PPK seems necessary for facilitating effective pedagogy.

Therefore, this study used narratives to examine the role of culture in the PPK of two teachers from two different nationalities, Iran and Japan, based on a cultural ecological standpoint. The research questions guiding this study were:

- (1) How do language teachers from diverse Eastern cultures, i.e., Iran and Japan, perceive the impact of cultural factors on their teaching effectiveness in the language classroom?
- (2) How could these perceptions be explained within three layers of the cultural ecological framework?

## Method

### *Context and participants*

Although there are huge differences among Eastern educational cultures, they share some similarities that differentiate them from Western culture. Fundamentally, the confusion ideas that emphasise respect for authority and a focus on harmony within the social structure are highly influential (Truong, Hallinger, and Sanga 2017). Although, because of globalisation, the internet and social media, teaching methods are becoming more similar, eastern educational stakeholders still prefer teacher-centred classrooms with a strong emphasis on lectures, memorisation, and examinations (Hemmati and Aziz Malayeri 2022). Some other cultural values, such as collectivism (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010), modesty and humility (Peng 2022), perseverance and hard work (Xu et al. 2023), also comprise the components of the Eastern culture.

The present study adopted a cross-cultural perspective to examine the role of culture in the PPK of teachers from different cultures. To do so, the participating teachers were selected from two different educational backgrounds: Iran and Japan. Although these two countries are both from the Eastern world where the literature on PPK is not sufficiently rich, they are far from each other geographically, historically, and culturally which can aid the cross-cultural nature of the study.

The two participants of the study were selected through convenience purposeful sampling since both were the researchers' trainees on a teacher training course and ran effective and successful sessions during the course. To ensure adherence to ethical standards, both teachers consented to participate in the study after being fully informed about the study's benefits and the option to withdraw. Participants were guaranteed that their personal information and identities would be kept confidential and that pseudonyms would be used in the report.

Ali (pseudonym) is an Iranian teacher who is 36 years old, has an M.A. in applied linguistics, and has taught English for 10 years. He was born and raised in Shiraz, Iran. Holding some teaching and proficiency qualifications such as Cambridge CELTA, Trinity CertTESOL, and IELTS (overall 8), Ali has been teaching English for about 10 years in

several English institutes. Some of his duties as a teacher are teaching spoken English to advanced levels and serving as a placement officer. He uses various real-life videos to prepare his students for using their English in multi-cultural communities. He loves watching movies and going to the gym in his free time and is an avid traveller since he believes that travelling always helps him lighten and brighten his mood.

Sakura is a Japanese teacher who is 30, has an M.A. in philosophy, and has taught English and Japanese for six years. Sakura's hobbies are cooking, learning languages, shopping, and reading books. She holds a Trinity CertTESOL and the licence of a Qualified Japanese Teacher, recognised by the Japanese government. She works in a private technical college in Kyoto, Japan in which Japanese and international students study. She is in charge of teaching Japanese to international students studying Japanese in their preparation courses before entering the main certificate/degree programmes. Before becoming a Japanese teacher, she had an American friend from the Northern part of the U.S. who was keen on learning Japanese and mentioned that the Japanese alphabet is confusing. Reflecting on this experience with him, Sakura realised that such confusion and mistakes could be common for anyone learning Japanese.

While Sakura teaches Japanese as a second language (because she teaches Japanese in Japan), Ali teaches English as a foreign language (because he teaches English in Iran). The *raison d'être* for this purposeful sampling was twofold. First, in line with the purpose of the study (i.e., cross-cultural), this provides a wider view of the phenomenon under study – culture – since it might be represented differently in contexts in which the target language is dominant compared to those where it is not. Second, it extends the study's significance beyond the realm of English Language Teaching (ELT) to include a broader field of language education. This deliberate expansion aims to enhance the study's applicability and cater to a diverse readership, offering insights that transcend language-specific contexts and can be valuable for researchers and practitioners engaged in various language teaching contexts.

### *Data collection*

Narrative inquiry, as a valuable tool to examine teachers' PPK (Barkhuizen 2016), is selected for use in this study to collect data from the participants. Barkhuizen et al. (2013) posit four reasons for a turn to narratives as a tool for investigating teachers' experiences: it is valuable for researchers tired of quantification, reflects postmodern concerns, is a resource to construct identities, and involves and empowers the research participants. Among different methods available for analysing the narrative inquiry data (Barkhuizen 2015), this study uses thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to explore themes regarding culture in the narratives. It is noteworthy to reiterate Hill's (2005) claim about narratives producing cultural results to justify the adoption of this method for examining the role of culture in teachers' PPK narratives.

To collect data, participating teachers received an email inviting them to write a narrative about a lesson conducted effectively with an eye on cultural elements influencing it and were asked to return the written narratives to the researchers. Based on the narratives collected, the researchers developed a set of questions to clarify ambiguities. After careful reading of the teachers' narratives, the participants attended

three 60-minute narrative interviews to tell their stories, answer some questions regarding their narratives, and clarify and extend their meaning (Appendix 1).

In the first narrative interview, the participants shared more information about the effective teaching sessions they described in their narrative. In the second interview, they delved into the role of culture and described how culture was manifested in that session and in general in their teaching. Finally, in the third narrative interview, they explained what they had learned from that experience and how it could inform their future practice. These discussions helped the researchers to reconstruct the meaning and delve into the deep layers of participants' thoughts to explore cultural particularities.

### *Data analysis*

The data analysis was done through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The interviews were transcribed and along with narratives were analysed for the possible codes categorised under the relevant themes of the underpinning theoretical framework (cultural ecology) by the researcher. Different codes and subthemes emerged from the teachers' PPK narratives in relation to the cultural ecology of language classrooms. The codes that emerged from the data were discussed with two fellow researchers to examine the representativeness of the theme they applied to in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Then, to apply member checking (Koelsch 2013) to enhance the validity of the results, the transcribed data were shared with the participants through email and they filled out an online consent form to show their agreement with the findings. Finally, the results were reported in the form of separate themes for each cultural ecological layer.

It should be noted that there are limitations to this study. First, this case study was conducted by two participants limiting the generalisability of the findings; therefore, and generalisation should be done with caution. Second, narratives are by nature subjective and both the researcher's and participants' personal biases and experiences could affect issues such as cultural stereotyping (Frühauf et al. 2023). Although I was aware of these biases (see researcher positionality section below) this could unconsciously and unintentionally impact the results.

### *Researcher positionality*

I am an Iranian teacher, teacher educator, and researcher in the field of TESOL and applied linguistics. I researched teacher education issues extensively in the Iranian context before moving to Turkey. At the time of this research, I was running an online teacher education programme whose participants were from Iran, Japan, Turkey, and Palestine. Being interested in culture and having done some research adopting the ecological perspective, I tried to combine both of these perspectives in this study. I never ignored my political, social, and cultural inclinations and tried to minimise their impact on the analysis of the result. However, my familiarity with the Iranian context and unfamiliarity with the Japanese culture could impact the result. To minimise this effect, I conducted some online research on Japanese culture, specifically the game the Japanese teacher described.

## Findings

To address the study's research questions, this section, informed by the underlying theoretical framework of the study (cultural ecological perspective), sets out the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the PPK narrative data regarding teachers' perceptions of the role of culture on their teaching effectiveness.

### *Micro-cultural ecology*

#### *Ali: activating prior cultural schemata*

The first factor in Ali's narrative that shaped his understanding of the role of culture in his effective pedagogy experience was activating prior cultural schemata. Ali tried to establish interest among his students by asking questions about the best ways of inviting friends to a party.

Extract 1: First of all, I tried to generate interest in the topic of the lesson and make them think by asking some questions regarding inviting friends and the best ways of inviting them to Iran. (Ali, narrative)

As it is seen in extract 1, Ali brainstormed a question that triggered some cultural schemata in the learners' minds. Although he did not overtly mention the use of culture in this stage of the session, he mentioned it in the first interview answering a question about why he used this activity at the beginning of the session:

Extract 2: Different countries use different forms of invitation and it is different from culture to culture. I wanted the students to think about their own culture and see if any difference with any other culture could come up. (Ali, interview 1)

As is evident in the extract, Ali showed awareness of cultural competence (SenGupta, Hopson, and Thompson-Robinson 2004) which involved understanding his own cultural biases and those of others. These extracts revealed how PPK enhanced instructional strategies and promoted a deeper understanding of cultural competence for him which emphasised an Iranian teacher's awareness of the impact of culture on his teaching effectiveness in micro-cultural ecology.

#### *Ali: cultivating linguistic culture*

Another covert cultural aspect representing Ali's understanding of the cultural influence on his teaching effectiveness was the time that he emphasised the use of language and expressions that were appropriate for an informal letter reflecting the importance of cultural awareness in the session. He taught the necessary language by analysing a model that acted as a springboard for the learners to employ the useful language.

Extract 3: ... I provided my learners with a model to familiarize them with the overall format of a friendly personal letter. In my view, that model answer was highly influential as it greatly helped my learners to learn about not only the correct format of such letters but also become familiar with a wide range of words and expressions that are used to invite friends. (Ali, interview 2)

Different cultures may have different norms and expectations regarding the language and tone used in different contexts, including personal letters (Gully 2008). Therefore, Ali's



focus on using informal language and expressions that were appropriate for inviting friends was a culturally aware approach stemming from his PPK that took into account the learners' cultural background and expectations.

Ali, also, elaborated on this activity in the interview. When he was asked if this activity had anything with culture arguing that 'language is a part of someone's culture and I think an important one' (Ali, interview 2). He went further by telling an anecdote of his teacher:

Extract 4: I can remember when we made fun of Farhangestan's (an Iranian institution to preserve the Persian language which provides Persian equivalences for some borrowed words) new word in the classroom, the teacher of the class said 'we can't take care of our culture if we don't take care of our language'. (Ali, interview 3)

The interview vivifies the role of small c culture which deals with some daily peculiarities of culture such as language. What Ali tries to convey here is how he thinks knowing the linguistic repertoire of the language is necessary for raising awareness about its culture. This is rooted in his PPK which is made available to him through a memorable experience that he had when he was a learner.

### *Meso-cultural ecology*

#### *Ali: promoting peer learning culture*

Iran is a collectivist country, in which 'people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty' (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, 92). This indicates that peer learning, albeit not practiced pedagogically in the education system, is internalised in the learners' culture. In Ali's narrative, the use of peer learning, in which learners read and evaluated each other's invitation letters, reflected an awareness of the learners' cultural background and the importance of social interaction in their culture. In collectivist cultures, social interaction and community involvement are highly valued, and peer learning can be an effective way to foster social interaction and learning (Chen 2000; Hussein 2022). Therefore, the teacher's use of peer learning displays a factor in the meso-cultural layer in the ecology of effective pedagogy. This perception could enhance the learners' motivation and engagement.

Extract 5: When everyone wrote down their responses, I asked them to read each other's invitation letters. It was a great chance for them to learn from each other ... (Ali, narrative)

Extract 5 shows how Ali exploited peer feedback in the class although it is not always embraced openly by all the learners. However, the cultural context they are brought up in can impact their involvement in such tasks. Ali stated in the interview that learning from each other was sometimes neglected in his culture since they had proverbs such as 'if peer or shareholder was good, God would have one' (Ali, interview 1) which derived from his observation of the context in which he experienced his life (PPK) not from a positivist inquiry. By this, he implied that he needed to explicitly ask the learners to share their ideas with each other to promote the spirit of teamwork in the class.

### *Sakura: encouraging competition and cooperation*

Sakura's narrative revealed the competitive nature of Japanese culture. The teacher used a game as a tool to make the learning experience more competitive and fun for the students. This aspect of competition is prevalent in many aspects of Japanese culture, including sports, academics, and business for it is a collectivist country (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). Sakura used a game, Karuta, as a tool to make the learning experience more competitive and fun for the students. The game involves players competing to accumulate the greatest number of Torifuda (picture cards) corresponding to Yomifuda (calling cards). Extract 6 explains this:

Extract 6: In the lesson, I divided the students into two groups and got one group to read aloud Japanese hiragana randomly, and the other group to pick the cards . . . But during this activity, the students seemed to be enjoying competing with each other. (Sakura, narrative)

In the past, the Japanese education system was highly centralised and focused on rote memorisation and exam-based assessment. However, in recent years, there has been a push towards more student-centred and experiential learning, as well as a greater emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. The government has also introduced some reforms to promote internationalisation, reflecting Japan's increasing engagement with the global community. Sakura's awareness about using games to integrate teaching language and culture reveals the underlying alignment with her PPK which is in line with the Japanese educational reform, which places a strong emphasis on competition, achievement, creativity, and critical thinking. This understanding was formed by observing students' competitive spirit and using this to develop a successful pedagogy.

Asking the reason for conducting the activity as a competition in the interview, Sakura argued that competition is a good source of engagement (Sakura, interview 2), she went on to speculate that 'competitiveness is not very much appreciated in our culture but it is a good engagement tool' (Sakura, interview 2). This showed how multicultural awareness for Sakura who had attended some international teacher training courses could impact her view and ideology regarding teaching and culture.

### *Macro-cultural ecology*

#### *Sakura: fostering cross-cultural communication*

Sakura's perception of culture's impact on her effective pedagogy, as illuminated in the PPK narrative, underscores the vital significance of cross-cultural communication. She introduces the game to non-native speakers to teach them about the Japanese language and culture. By doing so, Sakura aims to bridge the gap between cultures and promote cross-cultural understanding. The use of games, as a universal language, to teach language and culture is a way to make the learning experience more interactive and engaging for the students regardless of their cultural background.

Extract 7: Since I have students from different nationalities and cultures in my class, I tried to use a game that can involve people from different backgrounds in the lesson. I think all people no matter what culture they are from enjoy doing the games. (Sakura, narrative)

As is evident from the extract, Sakura emphasised the role of cross-cultural understanding and designed a task that could be accepted and enjoyed by people from different cultures. This cross-cultural understanding helped her to run an effective session. Sakura also expressed in the interview that ‘a girl in the session showed me on her cellphone a picture of a game she believed was very similar to Karuta, I can’t remember the name now’ (Sakura, interview 1). This classroom interaction (Tajeddin and Kamali 2023) not only revealed cultural empathy (Pedersen and Pope 2010), which is an indicator of cultural awareness, but also highlighted the informal, open dialogue that facilitated understanding and connection between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This approach also encouraged students to be more open-minded and accept other cultures. Although Sakura did not overtly refer to her PPK as a springboard for using games in her class, it is not hard to find the root of using the game in her immediate context such as family or the broader one (like the reformed Japanese educational system) in which she was a learner. This theme, formed in macro-cultural ecology, emphasised how her awareness of recognising cultural diversity, acknowledging shared human experiences, and promoting positive interactions guided her perception of culture’s role in effective pedagogy.

### *Sakura: reforming educational culture*

The narrative also highlights the challenges of learning a new language, specifically the complexity of the characters in the Japanese language. Sakura acknowledged that many learners have given up learning Japanese precisely because of the difficulty of learning the characters. The use of Karuta was a way to make the learning experience enjoyable and competitive to motivate the students to learn the language. This approach also challenged the traditional method of drilling the pronunciation and writing of characters. By using games to teach the language, Sakura aimed to create a more engaging and interactive learning experience.

Extract 8: The reason I introduced this game for elementary students was that it can always be boring to learn new alphabets or characters in learning foreign languages. And I knew that many learners had given up learning Japanese because of the characters . . . I could tell in the following lesson that the students remembered the hiragana and katakana better than when they learned them just by drilling pronunciations and writing.

The Japanese education system is often characterised as being a blend of traditional and modern elements (Duke 2009). On the one hand, the system is rooted in Japan’s long history of education and cultural values, such as the emphasis on discipline, respect for authority, and group harmony. On the other hand, the system has undergone significant modernisation and reform in response to changing social and economic conditions, as well as global trends in education (Willis, Yamamura, and Rappleye 2009). Sakura combined the Japanese tradition (Karuta game) with modern methods of education (gamification) by using this game which exemplified her understanding of cultural relevance and adaptability within the educational context. Overall, this innovative approach contributed to the formation of her understanding of effective pedagogy within the macro-cultural layer of the ecological framework.

### *Ali: incorporating digital culture*

Technology has become an aspect of culture. Technological culture or, more familiarly, *digital culture* is difficult to attribute to any one person as the concept has evolved over time with technological advances and their increasing integration in our daily lives. However, some scholars and researchers have contributed to the development and study of digital culture (e.g., Jenkins 2004; Manovich 2002; Murphie and Potts 2017). A very clear example of the covert representation of culture in Ali's narrative is when he discussed digital tools to increase the learners' involvement.

Extract 9: In this phase, after setting the task, providing prompts, and giving my learners a sufficient amount of time to brainstorm the given topic, a Padlet link was sent to them to write down their answers. This part was amazing, everyone welcomed that as they were all teenagers, and in this digital era, typing was more preferable for them . . . (Ali, narrative)

As can be seen in extract 9, the teacher's use of Padlet, a digital tool, to facilitate the writing and sharing of invitation letters reflects an awareness of the learners' familiarity and comfort with technology. This is particularly relevant for younger learners who may be more accustomed to using digital tools for communication and learning (Taghizadeh and Yourdshahi 2020). During the interview, Ali was asked about the technique's cultural relevance. He implied that this was not connected to their country's culture but a generation's culture, saying that 'when I look at teenagers these days they are always doing something with their cellphones. They're always typing. I guess it's happening around the world. So why not taking advantage of it?' (Ali, interview 1). It is clear from the extract that Ali's opinion, which is most probably rooted in his PPK as a teacher, is that teenagers' digital culture can be seen as an opportunity, not a threat. This understanding was formed as a result of the critical look Ali adopted in viewing the culture of digitalisation in the new generation of students.

### *Sakura: utilizing folk games*

Karuta, employed by Sakura to introduce and promote Japanese culture to non-native speakers, is a well-known card game in Japan that is played during the New Year's holidays. The game involves matching Yomifuda (a card with a poem or phrase) with Torifuda (a card with a corresponding picture). The reference to this game reveals the teacher's awareness of the broader cultural dynamics operating within the macro-cultural layer of the ecological framework, where overarching patterns of a given culture, come into play.

Extract 10: In this activity, I introduced a Japanese traditional game called 'Karuta', through which I intended to get the students to familiarize themselves with reading and pronouncing 'hiragana' and 'katakana', which are two of the three different types of Japanese characters. (Sakura, narrative)

The use of Karuta in the classroom setting was a way to introduce and promote Japanese culture to non-native speakers. Sakura also focused on teaching hiragana and katakana characters, which are two of the three different types of Japanese characters. By doing so, Sakura emphasised the importance of language learning in understanding and appreciating other cultures.

In conclusion, in one example, the PPK narrative of the Iranian teacher's effective session covertly reflected the importance of teachers' understanding of cultural factors in creating an effective and relevant lesson. Ali's emphasis on using appropriate language and expressions for an informal letter, incorporation of digital tools, and the use of peer learning demonstrated an awareness of the learners' cultural background, preferences, and expectations. By being culturally aware, he was able to create a student-centred learning environment that fostered engagement, motivation, and skill development. In fact, the effectiveness of Ali's session emphasised the vital role of PPK in shaping impactful teaching practices. In the other example, Sakura's narrative and interviews presented a uniquely overt approach to teaching the Japanese language and culture to non-native speakers. By introducing the traditional Japanese game of Karuta, rooted in her PPK, Sakura promoted cross-cultural understanding and engaged her students in a competitive and fun learning experience. The use of games to teach language and culture aligned with the Japanese educational reform which emphasises creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Sakura's approach challenged the traditional method of drilling pronunciation and writing of characters and created a more engaging and interactive learning experience for her students. This approach unveiled her perception of the role of culture in providing quality teaching and the formation of a culturally relevant pedagogy.

## Discussion

The present study explored teachers' perceptions of an effective classroom through their PPK narratives using the cultural ecological perspective. The findings revealed that culture had a critical impact on the effectiveness of language pedagogy in different cultural ecological layers in two distinct cultures, i.e., Iranian and Japanese.

Before we get into discussing the findings of this study in different cultural ecologies, it is noteworthy to argue that although Ali (the Iranian teacher) discussed the cultural aspects in his classroom covertly (albeit being discussed explicitly in the interviews), Sakura (the Japanese teacher) overtly explained the use of a Japanese game in teaching Japanese writing characters. In effect, the effectiveness of her lesson stemmed from her using that traditional Japanese game. This overt reliance on culture in Sakura's narrative can derive from the sense of pride (Bartleet 2016) or belonging to the culture and its representations such as community, religion/spirituality, geographical environment, etc (Ibrahim et al. 2016) which act in the macro-cultural level of the cultural-ecological framework employed in this study. The findings of this study could add to Altugan (2015) who asserted that there is a positive correlation between learning and cultural identity by drawing on approaches utilising learners' social and cultural experiences, suggesting that it can improve the successful teaching experience.

In the first layer of the theoretical underpinning of the study, two subthemes emerged (i.e., activating prior cultural schemata, cultivating linguistic culture) which apply culture into the microsystem of the cultural ecological framework. Although the former has been discussed widely in the literature and is proven to be an effective technique in teaching languages (Carr and Thompson 1996), the latter is a fairly new topic (Schiffman 2006). These two subthemes showed how teachers can employ culture in the bottom-up form in classes where words, sentences, languages, and previous experiences can improve their

experience in the classroom if they are in line with students' cultural expectations. This finding is in line with Yeh and Fu (2023) in that schema-triggering activities such as media-informed schema can increase students' ownership of their learning and influence their overall success. It also goes hand in hand with the findings of Sharifian (2017) that cultural linguistics can provide teachers with a deeper understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students, which can help them to develop more effective teaching strategies. By recognising the ways in which language and culture are intertwined, teachers can create a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment (Sharifian 2017). This study, nonetheless, adds to the literature by emphasising the significance of incorporating cultural awareness into instructional design and implementation.

In the second, meso-cultural layer, there are two subthemes, namely promoting peer learning culture and encouraging competition and cooperation. At this level, peer learning culture has attracted a great deal of attention from scholars and deals with how culturizing peer learning can help students and teachers run effective sessions. It aligns with Boud (2014) who maintains that peer learning in higher education can promote a variety of learning outcomes including teamwork, critical inquiry and reflection, increased confidence and self-esteem, and development of collaborative skills. Encouraging competition and cooperation, in addition, can be seen as manifestations of cultural peculiarities in the classroom. These two cultural peculiarities have been explored by different scholars and found to be important elements of cultural implications in education (Akkermans, Harzing, and Van Witteloostuijn 2010; Cox, Lobel, and McLeod 1991). However, the results of this study differ from those of Houston et al., (2005) in that Sakura (the Japanese teacher) showed high interest in the competitive game and her students seemed to enjoy it as well. Houston et al. (2005) have suggested that Japanese students score lower than their American counterparts on the enjoyment of competitiveness. This is also interesting as Japan, as a collectivist country, may encourage cooperation over competitiveness; a fact that this study contradicts which might be because of globalisation and the effect it has on cultural perception and practice (Hitt, Ireland, and Hoskisson 2019). Hence, this exploration of meso-cultural dynamics deepens our comprehension of the intricate interplay between culture and pedagogy, providing practical insights for educators to move beyond the simplistic stereotyping of communities based on sociocultural peculiarities, such as collectivist or individualist.

In the third, macro-cultural layer of the underlying framework, I found four subthemes: fostering cross-cultural communication, reforming educational culture, incorporating digital culture, and utilising folk games. First, cross-cultural communication has long been discussed as a useful tool for increasing the effectiveness of learning and teaching. For example, Sjøen (2023) urged the need to integrate 'critical and comprehensive approaches to internationalization into teacher education' (1). In another study, Young and Schartner (2014) delineated the benefits of cross-cultural communication as increasing cultural awareness and understanding, improving communication skills, reducing stereotypes and prejudices, increasing confidence in public speaking, and improving language skills to which this study can add one more, i.e., classroom efficiency. Reforming educational culture, as the second subtheme of macro-cultural ecology, posits that education can evolve and not only get different shapes but also opposite shapes. Moving from the traditional type of education in Japan (Duke 2009) to the modern type of education in

which peer interaction, gamification, and students' voices are accepted, celebrated, and encouraged is a positive evolution in the Japanese educational ecosystem. This study, therefore, agrees with Willis et al. (2009) that global issues such as access to social media and social and economic conditions change could make significant changes in the Japanese educational culture. The third subtheme (incorporating digital culture) lends support to a number of other studies that introduced, developed, and conceptualised a new form of culture called digital culture (Thumim 2012; Wu et al. 2023). Recent literature has highlighted the impact of digital culture on society and how it can inform our practices. For instance, Zuboff (2019) argues that digital technologies have created new forms of power and control that pose a threat to individual privacy and autonomy. Overall, digital culture has had a profound impact on the way people live, work, and socialise, and its influence is likely to continue to grow in the years to come. In the present study, it can be inferred that Ali used digital tools to strengthen his teaching aids and influence the learners' perception of the power of using them. Finally, folk games bring another aspect of culture to mind, namely Big C and small c culture. Sakura's description of a traditional game representing big C culture – it has been played for centuries and has a significant historical and cultural value – revealed the importance of this cultural phenomenon for her. This is in line with Bell (2020), Kramsch (1991), and Shih (2015) who suggest that integrating both culture types (big C and small c) can contribute to the effectiveness of a lesson. Overall, this comprehensive examination of macro-cultural themes adds depth and breadth to the literature on culture and pedagogy, by emphasising the evolving status of education with the advent and development of globalisation.

The findings emphasise the multifaceted role of culture in shaping educational practices in different Eastern cultures by revealing the role of culture in deep layers of classroom life from the micro-cultural components to the meso-cultural dynamics and finally the macro-cultural peculiarities. The significance of PPK in examining the complexities of cultural influences has been highlighted and offers insights for educators seeking to create culturally responsive and impactful language learning experiences. In effect, in line with Debnam et al. (2023), the findings of the present study affirm that teachers employed their available cultural resources strategically to increase the effectiveness of their sessions. This study augments previous research findings by highlighting that these resources vary significantly from context to context. Overall, beyond the empirical findings, the study reiterates the broader implications of cultural dynamics on educational practices, advocating for a deeper understanding of cultural influences for teachers seeking to create culturally responsive learning environments. By synthesising these findings, the study contributes to conceptualising a cultural ecological framework, offering a thorough perception of cultural factors affecting pedagogy at various ecological layers. This urges teachers to adapt their approaches to the cultural dynamics and peculiarities of their specific contexts. This broader conceptualisation not only enriches our understanding of culturally informed education but also reiterates the importance of contextually grounded pedagogical strategies in fostering effective language teaching and learning experiences.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to explore the role of culture in two teachers' PPK narratives about an effective language lesson from a cultural ecological standpoint. The

results revealed that culture has an important impact on the teachers' perception of the effectiveness of language learning or teaching. These perceptions were basically different and influenced by the cultural background of the teachers. The study identified a number of cultural aspects extracted from the teachers to impact effective lessons in different cultural ecological layers: activating prior cultural schemata and cultivating a linguistic culture in the micro-cultural ecology, promoting a peer learning culture, and encouraging competition and cooperation in the meso-cultural ecology and fostering cross-cultural communication, reforming educational culture, incorporating digital culture, and utilising folk games in macro-cultural ecology. The findings of this study suggest that incorporating cultural elements into language lessons can improve the successful experience of teaching and learning. It also highlights the importance of considering digital culture and big C and small c culture in language education. Moreover, the results of this study challenge the notion that collectivist cultures encourage cooperation over competitiveness on the grounds that the Japanese teacher encouraged competitiveness in her class.

These findings have significant implications for language teachers and curriculum developers who aim to enhance language learning through cultural perspectives. While teachers and curriculum developers could consider using traditional games or cultural practices as a means of engaging learners and promoting language learning, it is crucial to investigate the ways language teacher education can empower teachers to employ cultural resources effectively. To do so, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, teachers and curriculum developers should be encouraged to tailor their strategies to the specific linguistic and cultural context they are working within, the ones of themselves, their learners, and the target language. This could involve integrating cultural elements overtly into the lesson plans, activities, or assessments. In addition, teacher educators should recognise the importance of overtly integrating cultural aspects in language learning and teaching. This entails not only introducing traditional games but also providing teachers with the skills to critically assess and adapt these cultural resources to suit the unique needs and culture of their learners. Recognising the diversity in cultural backgrounds among students and between teachers and students, teachers should be equipped to exploit these variations to create an inclusive learning environment. Further studies can conduct similar research on teachers with different social, cultural, and educational backgrounds who teach different languages.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix

### Questions guiding narrative interviews

#### **Narrative Interview 1: Experience**

- (1) Can you talk more about the specific class that you described in your narrative?
- (2) What were the key elements or aspects of that teaching experience that made it memorable for you?
- (3) How did you feel during and after the class? Were there any challenges or unexpected moments that occurred?
- (4) Can you share any interactions or feedback from students that left a lasting impression on you?
- (5) In reflecting on this experience, what do you believe contributed to its overall success?

#### **Narrative Interview 2: Role of Culture**

- (1) How do you perceive the role of culture in shaping your teaching approach and interactions with students in the described class?
- (2) Can you identify specific instances where cultural factors played a significant role in the dynamics of the classroom?
- (3) How did culture help you run an effective session?
- (4) Were there any challenges related to cultural diversity in the classroom, and how did you address or overcome them?
- (5) In what ways do you incorporate cultural elements into your teaching, and how do you believe it enhances the learning experience for your students?

#### **Narrative Interview 3: Lessons for Future**

- (1) Reflecting on the experiences discussed in the previous interviews, what key lessons have you learned about effective language teaching?
- (2) Are there specific changes or adjustments you would make in your teaching strategies based on these experiences?
- (3) How have these experiences influenced your perceptions of the importance of cultural considerations in language education?
- (4) What advice or insights would you share with other language teachers who may be facing similar cultural challenges in their classrooms?
- (5) Looking ahead, what steps or initiatives do you envision taking to further incorporate cultural awareness and sensitivity into your future teaching practices?