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Responses to Bulgarian Culture in the Presentations of Japanese University Students – a Matter of Intercultural Communication

Abstract

In the field of foreign language teaching, it is impossible to discuss a language without dwelling on its culture, as well. This requires a new approach to language teaching methodology, one that emphasises interactivity, pragmatism, dynamics and comprehensiveness. In this paper we explore how the Bulgarian culture is disclosed in the presentations of Japanese university students. The data for analysis were collected over a period of three years (2014, 2015 and 2016) from three different classes. The following research questions are addressed:

- 1) What are the interests of the Japanese students regarding Bulgaria and the Bulgarian culture?
- 2) To what extent are the communication and the direct contact with Bulgarian students and teachers reflected in the presentations?
- 3) Are there grounds to consider the presentations a product of intercultural communication?

Keywords: language, culture, Bulgarian culture, intercultural communication, intercultural competence, Bulgarians, Japanese

Compared to the widespread popularity of other European languages and cultures, interest in Bulgaria and Bulgarian culture remains relatively modest in Japan. However, over the past decade, it has notably grown and continues to show steady momentum. During the 1990s, only two Japanese universities offered Bulgarian language as part of their curriculum. But in recent years, the number of academic institutions where students can study both Bulgarian language and Bulgarian culture, has expanded significantly. Today, eight Japanese universities, six public and two private, offer courses in Bulgarian – a clear indicator of this growing curiosity and demand.

The present article examines the “Bulgarian Culture and Lifestyle” course offered at a university (MKU, *initials are used to preserve anonymity) in central Japan, Gunma Prefecture. Surprisingly, it became popular among Japanese students, with a considerable number of young people applying each year. Upon completing the course, many of them travel to Bulgaria and continue their studies through summer seminars on Bulgarian language and culture at Veliko Tarnovo and Sofia universities.

To see how this tendency has practically developed as a successful endeavour, we will dwell on the final presentations of the Japanese students who attended the “Bulgarian Culture and Lifestyle” course. The data for this analysis were collected over a period of three years (2014, 2015 and 2016) from three different classes. The following research questions are addressed:

- 1) What exactly are the interests of the Japanese students regarding Bulgaria and the Bulgarian culture?
- 2) To what extent is the role of communication and direct contact with Bulgarian students and teachers reflected in the presentations?
- 3) Are there grounds to consider the presentations the outcome of intercultural communication?

Conceptual Framework: Culture, Intercultural Communication, Intercultural Competence

Since these presentations form the core of an international project between a Japanese university (MKU) and a Bulgarian university (VTU), it is crucial to explore the key concepts and competencies required – not only to produce the presentations effectively but also to ensure the seamless continuation of the educational initiative for both institutions.

Human activity and its outcomes are typically embedded within the traditional notion of culture. It boils down to symbols and perceptions that are specific for a given environment, shape human activity and are passed down through generations. At the same time, the concept of culture also encompasses the behavioural differences among diverse social, ethnic, and other groups.

In comparative studies within psychology and anthropology, the so called “cultural dimensions” of G. Hofstede are frequently cited. According to the researcher, there are five of them, although not all can be equally applied to every culture and country. These “cultural dimensions” can be summarized as follows:

1) Power Distance

Power Distance has been defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

2) Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty Avoidance deals with a society’s tolerance for ambiguity. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations.

3) Individualism

Individualism, on the one hand, versus its opposite, Collectivism, as a societal, not an individual characteristic, is the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups.

4) *Masculinity – Femininity*

Gender categories, perceived, again, as societal, not as individual characteristics.

5) *Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation*

Long-term values are perseverance, thrift, ordering relationships by status, and having a sense of shame; while short-term values include social obligations, respect for tradition, protecting one's "face," and personal steadiness and stability. (Hofstede 2011: 9–11)

In the field of foreign language teaching, it is impossible to discuss a language without contextualising it culturally. This requires an up-to-date view on the methodology of teaching a foreign language in which interactivity, pragmatism, dynamics and comprehension are incorporated. Therefore, it is natural to question the existing approaches and to propose new guidelines such as the Common European Framework of References, CEFR (2001), the JF Standard (2010), the Hosokawa's Holistic Approach (2003, 2005, 2008, 2009), etc. Kim's original concept concerning language teaching aligned with the learner's personality is also one of the innovative ideas in the field. The author proposes "six key terms: intercultural communication, culture, innovation, activity, dialogue and critique" (Gudykunst and Kim 2002: 520).

In the present paper we view culture as a dynamic notion, framed by Hofstede's dimensions (2011: 9–11). However, it is also shaped by the process of globalization, which has led to the introduction of the aforementioned approaches. In addition, it is important to clarify that the variables of *intercultural communication* and *intercultural competence*, as well as the impact of advanced *technologies*, *innovations*, and *digital competence*, are crucial elements of the present study, too, since all of them are reflected in the outcome (the presentations) of this educational project.

The term *intercultural communication* describes the communication between different cultures in which miscellaneous factors and attitudes intertwine on various levels. It is not just a dialogue between participants of a different cultural or ethnical background. Speakers must be aware of their own and other cultures to interact in an adequate way. Therefore, we can argue that *intercultural communication* is an "asymmetrical" process in terms of political, economic, social or cultural power; it is a process of multi-layered interaction (Gudykunst and Mody 2001, Gudykunst and Kim 2002, Totseva 2011). M. Byram describes the "intercultural speaker" as a language learner who "has an ability to interact with "others", to accept other perspectives and perceptions of the world, to mediate between different perspectives, to be conscious of their evaluations and differences" (Byram et al. 2001: 5).

The skills essential for successful intercultural communication are collectively known as *intercultural competence*. This encompasses not only linguistic knowledge and proficiency but also pragmatic abilities and personal skills that enable individuals to respond effectively to cultural differences. It involves recognizing and

appreciating “otherness,” accepting diversity, and identifying the common human factor within these differences, all of which are crucial for successfully navigating another culture (Vassileva 2018: 3–33).

In the modern world, *digital competence (DigComp)* is another key factor for successful international interactions and is also a fundamental component of the project discussed here. As outlined in *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, it refers to “...the confident, critical, and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, work, and participation in society. It is defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (*Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, EU 10). In the field of education, the *European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu)* has been developed to support both educators and learners. This framework consists of 22 competencies, organized in six key areas: Professional Engagement, Digital Resources, Teaching and Learning, Assessment, Empowering Learners, and Facilitating Learners’ Digital Competence (DigCompEdu, 2017) (Fig. 1). As outlined below, the project covered in this article utilizes advanced technologies and demonstrates the digital competence of all the participants involved.

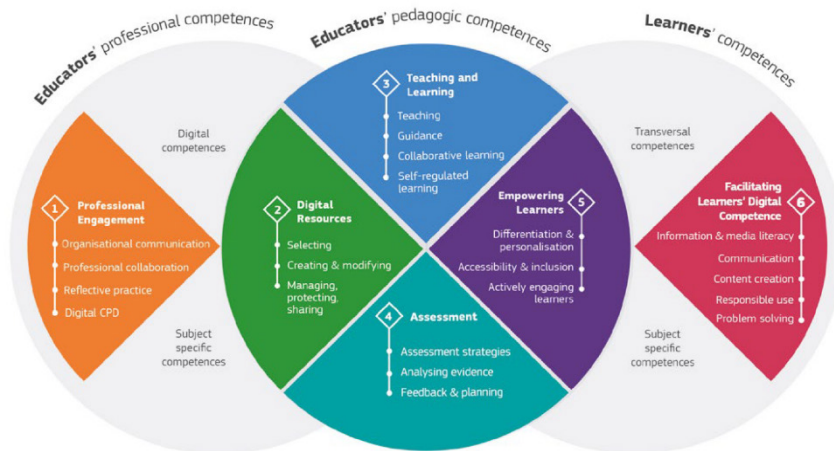


Figure 1. Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators. The Six Key Areas (<joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcompedu_en> [27.09.2024.])

The Present Study: Background

Gunma Prefecture’s interest in Bulgaria dates back to 2011, but the first steps towards some forms of cooperation were made in 2012, when the cultural festival of the town of Maebashi was held. The local population had the opportunity to enjoy Bulgarian folk songs and dances performed by Japanese artists and to meet Kaloyan Makhlyanov-Kotooshu, a Bulgarian sumo wrestler, popular in Japan at the time. The event was very widely covered by the local media and the visitors’ feedback was also reflected (Sofia Family 2012).

Since the rose, a traditional Bulgarian symbol, is also significant for the city of Maebashi, the idea of cooperation between the Japanese city and the Bulgarian city of Veliko Tarnovo was proposed. As a result, in May 2013, an agreement for academic collaboration was signed between a Bulgarian university (VTU, *initials used for anonymity) and a university in Gunma (MKU, *initials used for anonymity).

MKU introduced and included in its curriculum a new course centred around Bulgarian language and culture – “Bulgarian Culture and Lifestyle,” offered as an optional subject for one semester only.

The present study focuses on the final presentations of the Japanese students who attended the course, as they best reflect their interest in our country, language and culture.

Method

➤ Participants

The data below was collected over a period of three years – from 2014 to 2016 – for research purposes. It is based on a series of presentations on Bulgarian culture, life and history, presented in an organised form as a final production and a result of the Japanese students’ studies. The event took place in real time, but there was also a live webcast to an international audience of other Bulgarian and Japanese students, faculty and administrators from both universities.

The Japanese students, as shown in Table 1, totalled 52 people for the three years. In 2014, there were 15 participants divided into 5 working groups; in 2015, there were 20 participants divided also into 5 groups; and in 2016, there were 17 participants with common interests divided into 6 groups.

Table 1. Participants (n), Presentation Groups (n)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Participants (n)</i>	<i>Groups (n)</i>	<i>Presentations (n)</i>
2014	15	5	5
2015	20	5	5
2016	17	6	6
Total	52	16	16

➤ Contents and Topics

As the presentations were part of the “Bulgarian Culture and Lifestyle” course, their content was strongly shaped by the topics covered in the seminars. Consequently, many of the reports focused on Bulgarian culture, history, and traditions (Table 2).

Table 2. Topics

<i>Year</i>	<i>Topic</i>
2014	1. Bulgarian Heritage on the UNESCO List 2. Bulgarian Garments and Clothing 3. Bulgarian Cuisine 4. Traditional Dishes 5. Veliko Tarnovo
2015	1. Bulgarian Customs and Traditions 2. Architecture and Dishes 3. The Bulgarian Rose 4. Traditional Dishes 5. Architecture
2016	1. Bulgarian History 2. Bulgarian Cuisine 3. Architecture – Churches and Houses 4. Pets and Animals 5. Bulgarian Myths and Legends 6. Young People in Bulgaria – Education and Jobs

➤ Tools

We analysed all 16 presentations based on their 1) topics, 2) structure and resources employed, and 3) overall results, viewing the process as an exercise of interaction. Our analysis includes *observations* from the final webcast and *feedback* from faculty and peers. Additionally, we conducted brief, *semi-structured interviews* with the participants. Due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study, statistical methods were not applied.

Results and Discussion

The analysed aspects, listed above, align with the following three research questions:

- 1) What exactly are the interests of the Japanese students regarding Bulgaria and the Bulgarian culture?
- 2) To what extent the communication and the direct contact with Bulgarian students and teachers are reflected in the presentations?
- 3) Are there grounds to look upon the presentations as a product of intercultural communication?

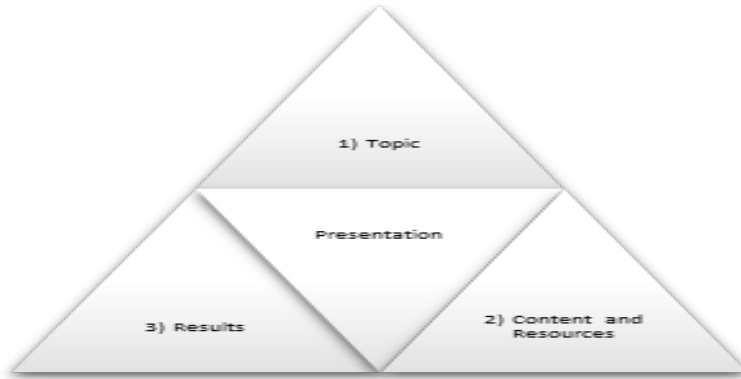
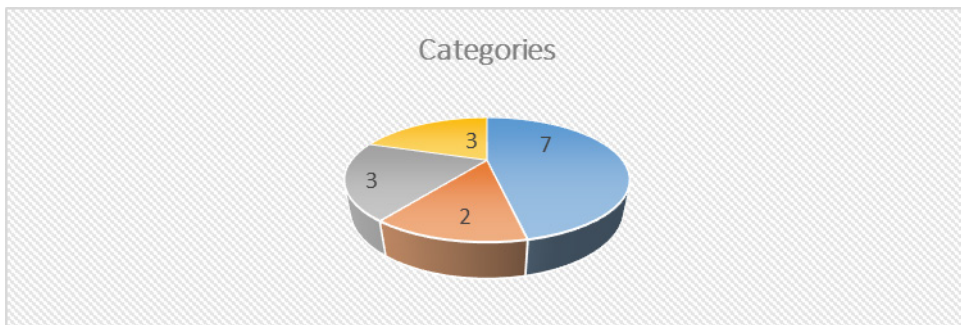


Figure 2. Aspects of Analysis

Choice of Topic

After a thorough examination of the content, we grouped the presentations into four categories based on their topics (Fig. 3):

1. Culture – traditions and customs, myths and legends, cuisine, Bulgarian dishes and food, clothing;
2. History – historical events and places related to the history of Bulgaria;
3. Architecture – monuments, buildings, Bulgarian heritage in UNESCO;
4. Others – the Bulgarian rose, pets and animals, young people in Bulgaria.



7 – Culture; 3 – Architecture; 3 – Others; 2 – History

Figure 3. Categories of Culture Topics

Figure 3 shows that the largest number of presentations focus on Bulgarian culture, with considerable interest in Bulgarian dishes and cuisine. These are followed by presentations categorized under “Others” and “Architecture,” while presentations on Bulgarian history are the fewest, ranking last.

Content Structure and Resources

While preparing their presentations, the Japanese students had the opportunity to communicate and receive guidance from the Bulgarian students and lecturers via advanced technological platforms. Are these interactive features reflected in their final work, and do they contribute to the authenticity and originality of the content?

In this section of the study, we focus on the thematic content of the presentations and the resources employed, looking for authentic information to prove the communication and the contact with the Bulgarians were effective and fruitful. Some eloquent examples are given below.

➤ 2014/presentation #2: Bulgarian Garments and Clothing

As one might assume, this presentation provides a detailed overview of Bulgarian male and female folk costumes, highlighting regional variations. However, some of the materials refer to the clothing of young people today. According to the Japanese students the corresponding information was acquired during the virtual conversations with the Bulgarian students.

➤ 2014/presentation #3: Bulgarian Cuisine; presentation #4: Traditional Dishes

These two presentations focus on traditional Bulgarian dishes and the ingredients used in their preparation. The shared recipes reveal interesting and authentic variations that differ from those found in the students' cited sources. From the follow-up interview, we perceived that these recipes were original family recipes shared by the Bulgarian students with whom the Japanese students interacted during the process.

➤ 2015/ presentation #4: Traditional Dishes

Some traditional Bulgarian dishes are also presented here, along with family recipes for "Banitsa" (a type of cheese pastry) and "Snezhanka" salad. Special attention is given to the intricacies of brewing homemade brandy, "Rakiya."

➤ 2015/ presentation #3: The Bulgarian Rose

A significant portion of the content presented here is sourced from specialized websites. What stands out more, however, is the presenters' motivation for choosing this particular topic. They noted that by consulting their Bulgarian peers, they learned that the "rose" is one of Bulgaria's symbols, which inspired them to choose this topic.

2016/ presentation #4: Pets and Animals

The topic of this presentation is different from the overall cultural and historical focus of the other presentations. The Japanese students' intrinsic motivation and passion are significant factors in the context here.

Their comments reveal they also conducted a short survey among Bulgarian students to find out what their peers think about "dogs" and "cats": "...the Bulgarians, like the Japanese, believe that dogs grow fond of humans very fast, and cats, on the other hand, have an independent, difficult to control character." The involvement

of the Bulgarian students is also evident in this part of the presentation. For instance, the Japanese students discuss stray dogs in Bulgaria and the public's attitude toward them, which reflects the opinions of the surveyed Bulgarians. Additionally, the presenters made notable efforts to discover the animal sound-matching words in Bulgarian, presenting them in an engaging and attention-grabbing way. This, too, was a result of their collaboration with the Bulgarian students.

➤ **2016/ presentation #6: Young People in Bulgaria – Education and Jobs**

The involvement of Bulgarian students in helping Japanese students access authentic sources to prepare for the course is particularly evident in this presentation. We came across episodes and experiences that could not be found on the Internet, such as opinions of the Bulgarians, narratives about their lives and career paths.

The presentations proved to be an effective way of assessing the teamwork between the Bulgarian and the Japanese students, as well as the collaboration between the students and their educators from both countries. We found reliable information, including resources and tools commonly used in scientific research. The course instructor noted that all Japanese groups maintained consistent online communication with their Bulgarian peers. Additionally, a shared chat room was created to provide further support for the presenters, allowing each participant to comment on the materials. This chat room served as an important tool in facilitating intercultural communication, offering a space for real-time feedback, clarification, and exchange of ideas across cultures. In the comments section, we can observe the encouraging assistance of both the Bulgarian students and the lecturers, fostering a supportive environment that transcended geographical boundaries.

However, can these presentations truly be considered the outcome of intercultural communication?

Presentations – the Outcome of Intercultural Communication

According to the definitions of *intercultural communication* discussed in the “Conceptual Framework”, it is essential to have communication in a foreign language between representatives of different cultures on multiple levels, which applies to our case. As is shown in Figure 4 below, Japanese students, Japanese teachers, Bulgarian students and Bulgarian teachers interact with each other in foreign languages (English, Japanese, Bulgarian) by means of high technologies – chat tools, e-mail, Skype, etc. All types of tools and resources are utilized.

As mentioned above, intercultural communication requires a set of new skills among which: respect, tolerance and understanding of the other culture, flexibility to adjust to challenging circumstances, appreciation of one's own culture, mindfulness in communication, etc.

Many of the explored presentations were constructed as small-scale comparative researches. In terms of tolerance towards the other culture, the representatives of both countries, Japan and Bulgaria, showed mutual understanding, sense of solidarity and acceptance. Noted for their politeness and considerateness, the Japanese

students were very patient with their Bulgarian peers, who took time to reset their timetables and answer the questions within the deadline via e-mail. On the other hand, the Bulgarian students alluded to some difficulties at the beginning of the communication. It appeared that they struggled to adapt to the indirectness of the Japanese communication style and had difficulty understanding exactly what was being asked of them. As time went on, the tasks and goals became more straightforward as they asked their Japanese peers for clarification. Ultimately, the Japanese and the Bulgarian students were able to realize and accept the differences in the communication styles of the two cultures, which contributed to a smoother and more dynamic interaction.

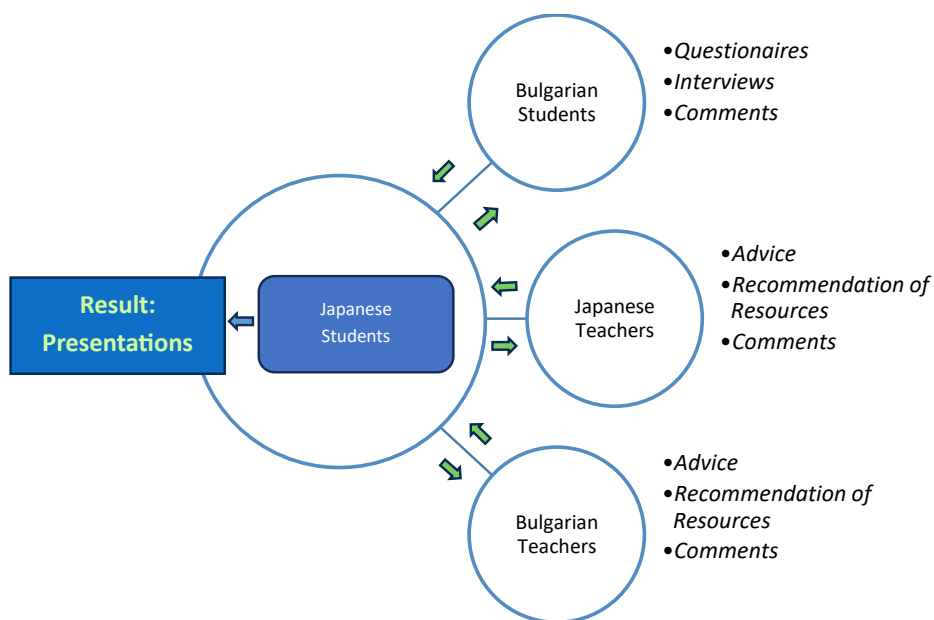


Figure 4. Intercultural Communication: Layers of Interaction

The atmosphere of “fellow feeling” and tolerance, along with the acceptance of “otherness” and a willingness to negotiate meanings, is also evident in the comments of the Bulgarian lecturers during the project’s discussion sessions. To maintain anonymity, we use only their initials in the excerpts below. The lecturers closely observed the entire process and maintained constant communication with both the Bulgarian students and the Japanese lecturers.:

M.V.: I was really worried about the communication between the Japanese and the Bulgarian students...eh...knowing how different their styles of communication are. And in the very beginning I noticed some difficulties that had

nothing to do with the language barrier...eh...Maybe the Bulgarian students were too direct and wanted to go straight to the point...while the Japanese students were a little bit hesitant and moderate. But all in all, everything went fine...eh...and the two sides reached a sort of understanding and acceptance of the differences in their communication.¹

The preliminary questions, sent to the Bulgarians via e-mail, were helpful in facilitating the communication between the two cultures, too. On the one hand, these steps were useful in preparing the necessary information and allowed the interactions to move directly to the core of the tasks.

K.M.: The communication and the exchange of information became easier, I think...eh...because the Bulgarian students asked about a list of questions in advance. I think...eh...this helped a lot...eh...the Japanese students with their shyness and...eh... the Bulgarian students became more organised and serious towards the matter.²

Twelve out of sixteen presentations are indicative of the curiosity of the Japanese students to trace common features between the Japanese and the Bulgarian culture. We come across information about Japanese mythical images and creatures, traditions and customs in Japan that are similar to those in Bulgaria, as well as food products available in Japanese supermarkets that can be used to prepare Bulgarian dishes.

Conclusion

In summary, the richness and multi-layered nature of Bulgarian culture are authentically and respectfully reflected in the presentations of the Japanese students, highlighting the profound impact of intercultural communication on the project. Through continuous exchange and collaboration, students not only accessed literary sources and specialised websites but also conducted targeted surveys and effectively utilised advanced communication technologies. The dynamic interaction between participants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity. Moreover, the project's success was reinforced by the remarkable acquisition of new competencies, as students navigated and adapted to intercultural dialogue, demonstrating growth in both digital and communication skills. This process of meaningful engagement not only enriched the presentations but also strengthened the overall educational experience for all involved.

¹ The excerpt is taken from the project's discussion sessions involving teachers and organizers, 2016

² The excerpt is taken from the project's discussion sessions involving teachers and organizers, 2016

We analysed the presentations from three perspectives: (1) choice of topic, (2) content structure and resources, and (3) results. These three aspects correspond to the research questions addressed at the outset of the survey. The triangulated approach we employed in analyzing the data provides a thorough view and a more comprehensive understanding of the process of creating a presentation. Beyond simply gathering information and addressing technical components, this process also involves developing essential intercultural and digital skills. Based on these points, we consider the presentations a product of intercultural communication, blending the individuality of the participants with their awareness of engaging with speakers from different linguistic and cultural background.

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