



Cultural Interpretation in Japanese Studies *A Comparative Analysis of Nihonjijō Curricula in Indonesia and Thailand*

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the teaching of *Nihonjijō* (Japanology) in an educational university in Bandung, Indonesia and a state university in Bangkok, Thailand. It examines how cultural education is integrated into the curriculum and influenced by national education policies, economic factors, and local societal needs. The university in Indonesia emphasizes traditional and popular aspects of Japanese culture, highlighting the intrinsic link between language and culture, while university in Thailand adopts a more pragmatic approach, focusing on social, political, and economic relations, with hands-on experiences such as field visits to local Japanese companies. This study employs document analysis of the syllabus as semester learning plans at both universities, alongside interviews with course instructors to understand the rationale behind syllabus design. The findings reveal significant differences in course objectives, teaching strategies, and credit allocation. The university in Indonesia fosters cultural appreciation through an exploratory approach, incorporating topics like traditional arts, manga, anime, and pop culture. In contrast, the university in Thailand integrates business and global perspectives, aligning with Thailand's strong economic ties with Japan and the demand for professionals in Japanese enterprises. These differences have important implications for Japanese cultural education in both contexts. In Indonesia, *Nihonjijō* serves to enrich students' cultural knowledge as part of language education. In Thailand, it is positioned as preparation for employment, emphasizing workplace-relevant cultural competencies. This study highlights the need for adaptive teaching methodologies that balance cultural understanding with practical application, ensuring that *Nihonjijō* remains relevant to both academic and professional landscapes.

KEYWORDS

Comparative Analysis; Curriculum; Japanology (*Nihonjijō*); Japanese Culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on the comparison of courses related to *Nihonjijō* (Japanology) in Japanese Studies programs in Indonesia and Thailand are highly relevant in the context of Today's globalization. As countries located in Southeast Asia, Indonesia, and Thailand share many similarities, including increasingly close relations with Japan. This is

reflected in the growing amount of Japanese investment in both countries. In 2021, Thailand ranked third in terms of the percentage of Japanese investment in Asia, with 12.7%, while Indonesia was sixth with 6.6% (Tsukada, 2024). Furthermore, Tsukada (2024) states that in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Japanese nationals visiting Thailand reached more than 1.6

million. This situation indicates the close affinity that many Japanese people feel towards Thailand.

From an educational perspective, Japan Foundation (2021) data show that Indonesia ranks second in the total number of Japanese language learners, with 711,732 learners. Thailand, on the other hand, ranks fifth with 183,957 learners. Although the number of Japanese language learners in Indonesia is very high, there has been a decline due to government policies that have made Japanese an elective subject. Nevertheless, this data underscores the strong interest in learning Japanese in both countries, despite differences in policies and social conditions that influence the number of learners in both Indonesia and Thailand.

Japanese language education at the university level in Indonesia and Thailand is conducted more comprehensively, including the cultural aspects of Japan. Understanding Japanese culture through language learning has significant benefits for career development (Yamamoto, 2018). Morikawa (2019) points out that lecturers of Japanese culture courses, even native Japanese speakers, often face challenges in designing effective teaching materials. A deep understanding of Japanese culture positively impacts students' reading and writing abilities, as highlighted by Winch (2016). If classified further, culture, society, social systems, politics, education, and everything related to Japan fall under the scope of *Nihonjijo* (Japanology). However, there is a tendency for students to only focus on the cultural aspects they are interested in (Morikawa, 2019), which can lead to bias in the selection of cultural materials to be studied. The background of the Lecturers also significantly influences the selection of cultural learning materials and the depth of cultural education (Shoji, Gonoji, Shibata, Matsumura, Sano, & Mizuno, 2024).

This study aims to compare the teaching of *Nihonjijo* in the two countries, as most research on teaching Japanese culture tends to focus on a single country. For example, Artarina (2020) and Herniwati, Risda, and Judiasri (2020) examine the context in Indonesia, while Yoshimine (2019) explores the situation in Thailand. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a contrastive perspective on the teaching of Japanese culture in two Southeast Asian countries, an approach that has not been addressed in previous studies. The object of comparison in this study is the syllabus, which serves as the primary source of data for document analysis. The research sample is limited to one university in each country, namely Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) and Siam University

(SU) in Thailand. The selection of these two universities as samples is based on their differing approaches to teaching *Nihonjijo*, which are influenced by the cultural context, curriculum, and learning priorities of each university. This allows for a richer comparative analysis. Additionally, both institutions provide sufficient access to syllabi and other relevant documents required for document analysis in this study.

Therefore, the research questions to be addressed in this study are: "What is the basis for determining *Nihonjijo*-related course materials in Indonesia and Thailand?" and "To what extent is cultural learning achieved in Indonesia and Thailand from the perspective of the course Lecturers?".

METHODS

This study employs a combination of document analysis and interviews to address the research problem that was previously identified. The primary data sources are the syllabi from courses related to *Nihonjijo* at two state universities, namely Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (hence UPI) located in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, and Siam University (hence SU) located in Bangkok, Thailand. The syllabi, as official academic documents, are analyzed using document analysis methods to evaluate the content, structure, and pedagogical approaches used in the courses. This analysis focuses on mapping the course materials, objectives, and evaluation strategies applied in the teaching process at each university.

In addition to document analysis, interviews with the lecturers responsible for these courses were conducted to gain deeper insights into how the course materials are selected, teaching methods are applied, and assessments are carried out. The lecturers involved in this study include one from SU with approximately 10 years of teaching experience in the course and one from UPI with over 25 years of experience. The interviews are essential for supplementing the document analysis, as the Lecturers have autonomy in designing and managing their courses, including adjusting the content to meet the needs of the students. In this study, the data obtained from interviews were not analyzed using a specific method, as the interviews were conducted to clarify information that was not explicitly stated in the syllabi of both universities, given the limited details available in the syllabi.

This method of document analysis provides a comprehensive view of the *Nihonjijo* teaching

process in two distinct educational contexts. The document analysis allows the researcher to thoroughly explore the research question, particularly regarding the factors influencing curriculum design and the implementation of Japanese culture education at UPI and SU.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Differences in the Syllabus

In determining course materials, UPI does so by analyzing available teaching materials such as *Nihonjijo Nyumon* (1995) and *Tanoshiku Yomeru Nihon no Kurashi 12 ka getsu* (1992). SU, on the other hand, determines course materials through a student needs analysis procedure. Student needs analysis can be conducted in various ways, such as surveys, interviews, classroom observations, academic data analysis, learning evaluation, and feedback from the graduates. Determining materials through needs analysis makes the materials dynamic, adapting to the results of that analysis. The results of the needs analysis are also crucial in formulating course objectives, as they encompass the relevance of

objectives to the learning materials, learning motivation, teaching efficiency, curriculum development, and improving the quality of graduates, for example, by enhancing both hard skills and soft skills in order to increase employability.

The formulation of objectives and course materials is reflected in the syllabus. Based on the syllabi of the two courses, there is a difference in the system between the number of class meetings in Indonesia and Thailand. In Indonesia, classes are usually held with 16 meetings, including mid-term and final exams. In Indonesia, this regulation is stipulated in the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 3 Article 16 of 2020 (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2020). In Thailand, on the other hand, classes are held in 15 meetings. This regulation has been established as one of the criteria for undergraduate education (Ministry of Education, 2015). In both Indonesia and Thailand, government regulations serve as the legal basis for determining the number of meetings in each course per semester. For detailed contents of the syllabi from both universities, refer to Table 1.

Table 1: Contents of Syllabi.

	UPI	SU
Course Name	Japanese Culture	Contemporary Japanese Society
Credit Hours	2 Credits	3 Credits
Course Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop sensitivity and concern for Japan and its culture • Master skills in understanding Japanese culture • Be able to understand information about Japanese culture • Be able to comprehend materials on Japanese culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study the conditions of contemporary Japanese society in various aspects such as daily life, social systems, political systems, economic systems, and the education system. • Understand the Japanese way of thinking and acting through the study of these topics.
Course Material (arranged from the first week to the last)	Understanding Japanese culture and its contribution to Japanese language education, the origin of Japan, the eras of Japan, traditional Japanese culture, modern Japan, characteristics of Japanese people, the social life of Japanese people, Japanese geography, cities in Japan, popular places in Japan, Manga and anime, Japanese music, Japanese idol culture	Course objectives and targets, overview of Japanese society, the role of mass media and information, life and issues in Japan, political systems and issues, developments in science and technology, living in Japan for Thai citizens, Japan's international relations, industrial economy and international trade, environmental issues and natural disasters, the Japanese education system and its issues, disappearing cultures and cultural heritage, Japanese companies, field studies to companies, classroom presentations.
Evaluation	Midterm exam, final exam, assignments, presentations, attendance	Midterm exam, final exam, presentations, oral exam
Teaching Methods	Lectures, presentations, discussions	Lectures, presentations, discussions

At UPI, the Japanese culture course is allocated 2 credits, whereas at SU, it is set at 3 credits. The allocation of 2 credits at UPI is based on considerations of the total number of credits required by students during their undergraduate education, which is relatively high, and this decision has been made by the curriculum development team. On the other hand, at SU, the equalization of the number of credits with other courses is a factor, particularly since the tuition fee at SU is significantly influenced by the number of credits taken. The 3-credit structure at SU allows for more time to study Japanese culture compared to UPI, which means that the learning materials regarding Japanese society and culture are more extensive at SU. The allocation of 3 credits at SU is because 3 credits at SU for one class meeting amounts to a total of 240 minutes and 15 meetings, resulting in a total of 1,500 minutes of Japanese culture learning. In contrast, UPI requires 90 minutes per meeting, totaling 1,440 minutes over 16 meetings.

Course Management and Materials

Lecturers have full autonomy in managing their courses, including determining the course materials and objectives. UPI, as an education-oriented institution, naturally has different course objectives related to *Nihonjijō* compared to SU. For instance, UPI emphasizes the importance of understanding Japanese culture and its contribution to Japanese language education, which is a distinguishing feature compared to SU's focus on communication studies. At SU, the first week of learning is focused on course orientation and its relation to communication, which is the primary focus of SU's studies. Furthermore, based on the interview results, differences were also identified in the selection of course materials. The lecturer at SU selects materials based on a needs analysis of the students, whereas the lecturer at UPI relies on topics provided in textbooks, such as *Nihonjijō Nyumon*. Material selection based on students' needs analysis is more dynamic as it adapts to the identified needs of the students. In contrast, material selection based on the availability of textbook content may lack the same level of dynamism. However, with their academic autonomy, lecturers may integrate more up-to-date materials at their discretion. Differences were also evident in the selection of learning activities. At SU, most learning activities involve giving students opportunities to reflect on Japanese culture from their own perspectives, while the lecturer provides explanations for the theoretical aspects of the

material. On the other hand, at UPI, most sessions involve student presentations on materials previously provided by the lecturer. Additionally, project-based assignments are given, requiring students to create videos about Japanese culture.

The universal connection between language and culture is also reflected in the perspectives of the course Lecturers. However, this universality does not necessarily result in many similarities in course content. From the Table 1, the Japanese culture courses at UPI and SU show significant differences in both focus and approach. At UPI, the materials taught emphasize the traditional and contemporary aspects of Japanese culture, such as the origins of Japan, historical periods, traditional culture, and the social life of Japanese people. Additionally, popular topics such as manga, anime, and idol culture are also an important part of the curriculum. This focus reflects an effort to provide a comprehensive understanding of various aspects of Japanese culture to students, from tradition to popular culture, which has now become an integral part of Japan's image in the world.

Conversely, at SU, the approach to teaching Japanese culture is more pragmatic, focusing on social, political, international, and economic relations. Topics such as Japan's political system, the development of science and technology, environmental issues, and Japan's international relations with other countries, especially Thailand, are the focus. This approach appears to be designed to equip students with more applicable and relevant knowledge in the context of globalization, where Japan plays a significant role in the economy and technology. What sets this apart from the curriculum at SU is the inclusion of field visits to local Japanese companies. This is due to the high level of Japanese investment, nearly double that in Indonesia. Fukushima (2018) states that universities in Thailand aim to send their students to Japanese companies. This is in line with Jitpaiboon, Rungswang, and Tanigawa (2024), who stated that the highest motivation for Thai students to study Japanese is the desire to pursue a career using the Japanese language. In this context, the course serves as a means to introduce students to Japanese companies.

Visits to local Japanese companies are an important aspect of the learning process, as emphasized by Putra (2022). Japanese companies abroad not only function as representations of *Nihonjijō* but also as spaces where acculturation with local culture occurs. Despite adapting to local culture, these companies maintain typical Japanese

culture and work ethic. Additionally, Japanese companies serve as places for natural cross-cultural communication between Japanese people and local workers.

Putra (2022) criticizes *Nihonjijo* teaching materials for being too focused on domestic Japanese culture, considering that most graduates who learn the Japanese language work in or continue their studies in their own countries, not in Japan. Therefore, to enhance the practical value of *Nihonjijo* materials, it is necessary to consider teaching that is more relevant to the local context of the students, such as life in Japanese companies in their region. Furthermore, Suzuki (2021) emphasizes the importance of university contributions in the local context, particularly in language and cultural education. By incorporating visits to Japanese companies as part of *Nihonjijo* education, as practiced by Siam University (SU), the university's role in strengthening the relationship between education and local needs becomes clearer and more directed.

These differences not only reflect the differences in educational goals between the two countries but also how Japanese culture is interpreted and taught. In Indonesia, with its emphasis on traditional and popular aspects, the curriculum tends to be exploratory and aims to build an appreciation for the uniqueness of Japanese culture. Japanese culture learning at UPI is mostly conducted through group presentations, where the materials are provided by the course Lecturer beforehand. In contrast, at SU, students study the material independently with concrete thinking, such as when studying historical themes, where students must think as if they were part of the historical events themselves.

Additionally, 'Japanese Language Teaching Internship' every February, where Japanese individuals are accepted as teaching interns and incorporated into the classroom by the course Lecturer. The rotation of Lecturers provides students with a multi-perspective view. Similarly, UPI often receives Japanese students who are doing fieldwork, and they are sometimes included in communication or cross-cultural understanding courses. At both UPI and SU, Lecturers will provide theoretical explanations for the necessary parts of the material, but students are, of course, expected to form their understanding of the culture based on their perspectives. However, as noted by Shoji, Gonoji, Shibata, Matsumura, Sano, & Mizuno, (2024), the difficulty in including various vocabulary from different fields, especially entertainment, presents challenges in this learning

process. This suggests that although popular entertainment topics like anime are very appealing to students, there is a discrepancy between the preferences of Lecturers and the interests of students in exploring Japanese culture through these media (Shirai, 2017).

In the context of foreign language teaching, Ivenz and Blanka (2022) assert that the proportion of cross-cultural learning should be equal to that of linguistic learning, as the primary goal of foreign language instruction is to develop Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). However, Ivenz and Klimova argue that current foreign language teaching practices do not yet reflect this balance. This is because, although many educators recognize the importance of incorporating ICC development into their courses, they are often unsure about which teaching techniques and activities are best suited to achieve this goal.

The differences between the pragmatic approach at SU and the traditional approach at UPI in studying Japanese culture have the potential to impact the development of students' ICC. For instance, the use of a pragmatic approach can better train students to handle real and complex situations in intercultural interactions. This approach typically focuses on direct applications and practical cases, encouraging students to understand Japanese culture in socially and professionally relevant contexts. On the other hand, the traditional approach tends to enable students to gain an in-depth understanding of Japanese culture from normative and historical perspectives. However, this approach may limit the development of adaptive skills if the material is not sufficiently connected to actual intercultural communication scenarios. Nevertheless, to clearly determine the impact of these differing approaches, further comparative studies are needed, utilizing standardized ICC evaluation instruments.

Regarding the syllabus contents, the materials included in SU's syllabus are more pragmatic and it reflects the need to prepare students to face global challenges. This more analytical approach may be influenced by the need to integrate a critical perspective on the materials being taught, as suggested by Kodama (2018). By fostering a critical perspective, students are expected to be more objective and fairer in understanding Japanese culture and able to construct new views on that culture, especially through methods that utilize technology and international collaboration, such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Moreover, Ootani and Nishiguchi (2019)

emphasize the importance of utilizing cultural diversity within the student body as a learning resource in the context of education. Both in Indonesia and Thailand, this approach can be applied by involving students with different cultural and language backgrounds, allowing them to learn not only about Japanese society and culture but also about how that culture interacts with their own. Thus, students in both countries may have the opportunity to develop a broader international perspective compared to learning without involving students from different cultural backgrounds.

Overall, these differences reflect how both countries adjust the teaching materials of Japanese culture according to their national educational needs and goals, alongside the unique characteristics of each program. In Indonesia, the more exploratory approach with a focus on popular culture is considered appropriate for fostering interest and appreciation for Japanese culture among students. On the other hand, in Thailand, the more analytical approach, oriented toward social, international, and economic relations, seems more relevant for preparing students to face global challenges in the future.

Course Achievement from Lecturers' Perspectives

The similarities between UPI and SU are evident in their evaluation methods, particularly in the use of presentations and reports (papers). Both institutions place significant emphasis on these elements, assessing presentations based on commonly accepted criteria such as performance, use of media, mastery of the subject matter, and interaction with the audience. This rigorous assessment process ensures that students are not merely presenting information but are also engaging with the material in a meaningful way. Reports or papers are evaluated on the quality of arguments presented, critical analysis, organization, use of sources, and other relevant factors. This focus on presentations and reports reflects a shared approach to developing students' communication and analytical skills, which are essential for academic and professional success.

In addition to these similarities, UPI incorporates written exams in both mid-term and final assessments, as well as tasks such as creating videos related to Japanese culture. This approach not only tests students' understanding of the material but also encourages them to apply their knowledge creatively. At both institutions,

attendance, active participation, presentations, and reports form the core of course evaluation. This comprehensive approach to assessment emphasizes continuous evaluation and the development of skills directly applicable to real-world scenarios, such as effective communication, critical thinking, and cultural sensitivity.

At SU, the Lecturer acknowledges the inherent subjectivity in cultural interpretation, which can vary widely among individuals, including the Lecturers themselves. To address this, peer evaluations are implemented, allowing students to assess and provide feedback on each other's work. This method encourages students to consider different perspectives and enhances their critical thinking skills. The Lecturer also values group assignments for fostering collaboration and deeper learning. However, these group tasks present challenges, particularly in accurately assessing each student's individual contribution within the group. While group work is invaluable for learning, ensuring that every student is evaluated fairly requires careful consideration and additional effort on the part of the Lecturer.

Moreover, cultural learning differs significantly from language learning, which emphasizes accuracy. In cultural education, there is more room for constructive thinking and personal expression. This flexibility allows students to explore cultural concepts more deeply and can increase their motivation to learn, particularly if the Lecturer adopts the role of facilitator for cultural experience activities (Tanigawa, 2020). This approach not only enriches the learning experience but also helps students develop a more nuanced understanding of cultural differences.

Despite the challenges associated with these evaluation methods, both universities strive to create an environment that encourages active student engagement and the demonstration of understanding through various forms of expression. This holistic approach ensures that students develop a well-rounded skill set, preparing them for real-world applications beyond the classroom. The emphasis on both individual and group work, along with continuous assessment, helps students build the skills necessary for success in a globalized world.

Furthermore, each institution adapts its evaluation criteria to suit its educational goals. For instance, at SU, additional emphasis is placed on the student's ability to identify problems within a theme, the relevance of answers to the questions posed, information literacy skills, and the ability to express meaningful opinions. This detailed and

multifaceted approach to evaluation ensures that students are not only absorbing information but are also able to apply their knowledge critically and creatively in different contexts. By fostering these skills, both UPI and SU are equipping their students with the tools they need to navigate the complexities of intercultural communication and understanding.

CONCLUSION

The comparison between UPI and SU reveals significant differences in how Japanese culture is taught, reflecting the distinct educational objectives and cultural contexts of Indonesia and Thailand. UPI's approach, which emphasizes traditional and popular culture, seeks to build a broad appreciation of Japanese culture among students, aligning with its educational mission. On the other hand, SU's pragmatic approach, with a strong focus on social, political, and economic aspects, prepares students to engage with Japan's role in global contexts, particularly in relation to Thailand's economic ties with Japan. Despite these differences, both institutions share a commitment to fostering critical thinking, effective communication, and a deep understanding of Japanese culture through their respective curricula.

Given the distinct approaches observed, it is recommended that UPI consider incorporating more pragmatic elements into its curriculum, such as real-world applications and local cultural interactions, to enhance the relevance of Japanese cultural education in the context of global challenges. Conversely, SU could benefit from integrating more traditional and popular cultural elements into its courses to provide students with a more rounded understanding of Japanese culture, which could deepen their cultural appreciation and engagement. Additionally, both universities could explore more collaborative opportunities, such as joint cultural exchange programs, to provide students with diverse perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of Japanese culture in a globalized world.

The sample in this study is limited to one institution in each country. Therefore, future studies should include a larger number of institutions to enable quantitative analysis, providing a more representative depiction of the situation in both countries.

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