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ARTICLE

Transcultural Competence and Empathy in Language Education: Imagining the Unimaginable

MICHIKO URYU

San Jose State University
E-mail: michiko.uryu@sjsu.edu

The 2007 MLA report offered guidelines and competencies for foreign language majors at American universities in the age of globalization. The notion of translingual and transcultural competence suggests that today's foreign language education is not merely a matter of language acquisition, but humanistic learning. The ultimate goal for foreign language learners should be to gain alternative ways of seeing the world, namely, "imagining the unimaginable" (Ozick, 1987). This underscores the central importance of empathy in foreign language education. Yet the true challenge lies in how to assess such an abstract concept. Even eighteen years since its initial publication, the report remains highly relevant, especially today, as we witness cultural, ideological, political and socio-economic divisions and the accompanying conflicts rooted in a failure to imagine the perspective of "others."

This paper explores a new approach to assessing learners' transcultural competence, focusing on the role of empathy in understanding the cultural "other." Discourse analyses of two student final papers were conducted and compared, drawing on poststructuralist theories and a sociolinguistic analytical framework. The results show that one student constructed an imagined Japanese "other" through a process of projection and initiated an empathetic dialogue beyond time and space, whereas the other inadvertently reproduced an Orientalist discourse by negatively stereotyping Japanese people, culture and society. This study advocates for discourse analysis as an effective formative tool for assessing and improving existing syllabi and curricula.

> Symbolic competence means not only the ability to interpret and negotiate meanings across languages and cultures, but also to position oneself critically in relation to the symbolic power of language. (Kramsch, 2006, p. 251)

INTRODUCTION

The 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) report presented guidelines and competencies for foreign language majors in U.S. universities, addressing the challenges of globalization. It emphasized that language learners should acquire "critical language awareness…historical and political consciousness, social sensibility, and aesthetic perception" alongside functional language skills to achieve translingual and transcultural competence (MLA, 2007, p. 4). The importance of studying foreign languages and cultures has become increasingly evident in light of global economic integration, migration and digital connectivity. The concept of translingual and transcultural competence emphasizes that language education now extends beyond proficiency to embrace humanistic learning. The ultimate goal is not just to acquire knowledge but to develop alternative ways of perceiving the world —or, as Ozick (1987) describes, "imagining the unimaginable." More than eighteen years after its publication, the MLA report remains highly relevant, as cultural and ideological divisions continue to stem from a lack of

imagination and empathy. Reaffirming its principles is crucial to addressing these challenges. To achieve these goals, foreign language educators must create environments that foster empathy for cultural "others." However, assessing such an abstract concept poses challenges, with three key questions remaining unresolved: (1) How can educators critically examine how empathy emerges in discourse, given its subjective and intangible nature? (2) What methods can they employ to assess empathy in students? (3) How should such assessments be integrated into the curriculum?

This paper explores innovative ways to evaluate transcultural competence, focusing particularly on empathy for cultural "others." It demonstrates how combining discourse analysis with sociolinguistic approaches rooted in poststructuralist theories can provide a systematic framework for capturing empathy. Claire Kramsch's (2006, 2020) work on symbolic competence serves as a key theoretical foundation for this study. Her vision of language learning as symbolic action—not merely as communication but as critical and imaginative engagement—underscores the need to cultivate empathy and ethical awareness.

By analyzing the final papers of two students enrolled in a Japanese culture course at a U.S. university, the study reveals how learners construct their imagined cultural "others" through projection and engage in empathic dialogues. The paper will also discuss how this phenomenon connects to a poststructuralist approach (McNamara, 2012), where Japanese culture is taught as a hybrid production rather than an essentialized notion. This approach deconstructs exoticized views of Japanese culture, emphasizing its hybrid nature and evolution through historical intercultural encounters. Assessing empathy is essential not only to poststructuralist teaching but also to curricula designed to foster transcultural competence.

GROWING INTERDISCIPLINARY INTEREST IN EMPATHY

The study of empathy has garnered increasing attention across various fields. The medical and behavioral sciences have pursued interdisciplinary investigations to define empathy and understand its effects on behavior. Advances in neuroscience, such as fMRI usage, have illuminated empathy's functional aspects and neuroanatomy, identifying where it is generated and located in the brain (Fallon et al., 2020). Concurrently, endocrinological research on oxytocin has highlighted the mind-body connectivity underpinning empathy (De Dreu, 2012; Macdonald & Macdonald, 2010). Genetic studies have further revealed how humans and animals may exhibit varying innate capacities for empathizing with others (Chen et al., 2009; Knafo et al., 2008). These scientific tools have driven a rapidly expanding trend toward empirical studies of empathy.

In parallel, the humanities have also focused on empathy as a critical topic over recent decades. While the natural sciences seek to explain empathy using empirical data, the humanities adopt a philosophical lens, exploring the concept of "self" and "other" as a dynamic relationship fundamental to human understanding. Within the social sciences, particularly anthropology, researchers investigate questions such as why empathy is crucial for understanding others and how it influences emotional states and behaviors. Hollan and Throop (2011) provide a comprehensive interdisciplinary perspective on empathy, building on Halpern's (2001) work. They define empathy by distinguishing it from related concepts, emphasizing that it is neither "a third-person observer's detached insight," "pure theoretical knowing," nor "an affective merging identification, with another" (p. 3). Although empathy may share characteristics with concepts like "intersubjectivity," "intentionality," "projection," or "emotional contagion," it diverges in its dynamic and evolving nature. Empathy involves

the continuous exchange of ideas and negotiation to ensure accuracy. What sets empathy apart is “this concern with accuracy, the willingness, indeed the necessity, to alter one’s impression of another’s emotional state as one engages with the other and learns more about his or her perspective” (p. 3). For Hollan and Throop, empathy encompasses a multifaceted process that requires a willingness to understand others and acknowledges the evolving and discursive nature of identity. This interpretation of empathy as a relational, negotiated process is especially relevant to foreign language education, where engagement with linguistic and cultural “others” fosters transcultural competence. Hollan and Throop’s insights intersect with the 2007 MLA guidelines, which define transcultural competence as not only “the ability to operate between languages,” but also the capacity to “reflect on the world and themselves through another language and culture” (p. 3-4). This philosophical view departs from traditional concepts such as "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972) or "intercultural competence" (Byram, 1997) by emphasizing empathy’s transformative potential in reshaping one’s subject position.

Claire Kramsch’s concept of “symbolic competence” deepens this theoretical foundation by linking language learning to identity work and ethical engagement. Symbolic competence enables learners to construct alternative perspectives through imagination, positioning, and reframing of symbolic systems (Kramsch, 2006; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). It entails the capacity to understand language as symbolic power—and to recognize that meaning itself is contingent and performatively shaped. Kramsch argues that “symbolic competence enables learners to understand that meanings are not fixed but change with time, place, and interlocutor, and that they themselves can play with these symbolic systems to create alternative realities” (2006, p. 251). This symbolic agency invites empathy not as a passive emotional state, but as a reflective and imaginative stance grounded in ethnical engagement and intercultural understanding (Kramsch, 2020; Kramsch & Uryu, 2020). Her framework also draws on poststructuralist theories of performativity (Butler, 1997), positioning learners as agentive subjects capable of reworking discourses and resisting essentialist ideologies. This symbolic orientation aligns with Hollan and Throop’s view of empathy as a dynamic process of adjustment and recognition across difference. Together, these perspectives establish a foundation for assessing transcultural competence through discursive practice rather than behavioral or psychological markers.

Dewaele and Li’s (2012) research on multilingualism and empathy partially aligns with the aforementioned view. Their study found that advanced multilinguals who frequently use a non-native language tend to exhibit higher levels of cognitive empathy, defined as the “intellectual/imaginative apprehension of another’s mental state” (Lawrence et al., 2004, p. 911). However, merely acquiring multiple languages or living abroad do not inherently lead to greater empathy. Instead, motivation and a willingness to actively engage with linguistic and cultural "others” are crucial. While the study focuses on cognitive rather than emotional empathy, it emphasizes agency’s role in empathetic understanding.

Building on these insights, the present study adopts a poststructuralist and symbolic perspective on empathy and subjectivity. Rather than treating empathy as a psychological state to be measured, it examines how empathy is discursively constructed in student texts through rhetorical strategies, symbolic positioning, and intersubjective engagement. The analysis of student writing in a Japanese culture course explores how learners navigate cultural difference, construct proxy identities, and engage with imagined “others.” Specifically, it investigates how social, cultural, ideological and personal elements shape their evolving understanding of self and other. In doing so, it extends Kramsch’s concept of symbolic competence and offers discourse analysis as a tool for assessing empathy and transcultural learning in context.

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This research employs discourse analysis of students' written texts to examine how empathy and transcultural awareness are represented in their final course reflections. The qualitative analysis of final papers is appropriate, as these texts offer insight into how students linguistically construct cultural others and position themselves in relation to them. To explore the complexity of written texts as sociocultural and ideological communicative practices, this study adopts Blommaert's (2004) poststructuralist sociolinguistic framework, integrating interactional sociolinguistic methods such as speech act theory (Austin, 1962), frame analysis (Goffman, 1981), and politeness theories (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lakoff, 1973) with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1999; Simpson, 2003). This combination elucidates how power operates within discourses through institutions and cultural practices.

Interlocutors are first conceptualized as social actors whose communicative practices are shaped by ideologized discourses (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1977). Blommaert's framework, however, reconceptualizes interlocutors through a poststructuralist lens, particularly Butler's (1997) notion of performativity. Here, interlocutors are redefined as speaking subjects with agency, capable of resisting dominant structures through language as a symbolic action.

Under this framework, students' texts are not treated as simple reflections of learning, but as semiotic practices shaped by social positionings, ideological tensions, and culturally available discourses. This perspective allows for analysis of how empathy and transcultural competence are discursively constructed and indexed in language, rather than presumed as internal states or fixed outcomes.

Research Site: Sociocultural and Economic Context

This section begins by examining sociocultural, economic, and ideological contexts that shape these texts as discursive instantiations of learner subjectivity and worldview. The research site was a public university in a large U.S. city with a significant minority and immigrant population, making it racially and economically diverse. The city is also known as one of the most economically depressed in the country. The student population reflected this diversity. According to the university's website, approximately 50% of students identified as White, with the remainder comprising about 20% African American, less than 20% Hispanic and Asian combined, and a small percentage listed as "unidentified." Economically, 22% came from households in the top 20% income bracket, while roughly 20% were from the bottom 20%, fostering diverse perspectives and interactions.

Despite being one of the largest institutions in the state, the Japanese major was small. To attract interest, the program offered an introductory Japanese culture course open to all majors. That year, over 15 students enrolled, likely drawn by the growing popularity of Japanese pop culture. Although most had other academic focuses, many were already familiar with manga, anime, and games, showing high motivation to explore Japanese culture. The class was predominantly male, with only three female students, and its racial composition—African Americans, White, Asians, and Hispanics—reflected the university's broader diversity.

Ideological Issues in Teaching Japanese Culture and the Need for a Poststructuralist Approach

Teaching the culture of the "other" presents significant challenges, especially considering the ideological impact embedded in cultural discourses that distinguish between "self" and "other." As Kubota (1999) points out over two decades ago, Japanese language and culture courses often perpetuate an Orientalist ideology, emphasizing the divide between an American "self" and an exotic Japanese "other." This ideology is reinforced through classroom interactions and materials, as both instructors and students engage with cultural discourse. While learners may approach the target language and culture with sincere interest, these efforts can unintentionally reinforce essentialist or exoticizing perceptions of the other.

The subtle perpetuation has raised concerns among educators, especially given the widespread fascination with Japanese pop culture and its associated stereotypes. These concerns are critical not only because Japanese culture is often exoticized in Western contexts (Shibusawa, 2006), but also teaching cultural differences can reinforce the very discourse it seeks to avoid. This occurs when instructors highlight the "different" aspects of Japanese culture as unusual or unique. Teaching the culture of the "other" involves a tension: while cultural differences are striking, they can also prompt reflective engagement. To avoid reproducing Orientalist discourse, pedagogical approaches must foreground cultural complexity, hybridity, and the discursive nature of identity.

In response, the course adopted a syllabus grounded in poststructuralist theory. As McNamara (2012) explains, poststructuralism questions "stable truths, the structure of the linguistic sign, and the idea of progress" (p. 477) while supporting "critical awareness of the role of desire and the presence of the irrational within social structures" (p. 478). This perspective helps learners deconstruct essentialized views of Japanese culture and emphasizes similarities rather than differences. Rather than correcting student perspectives, it invites learners to examine how discourses are constructed and mediated by power, history, and positionality.

Poststructuralist theory reconceptualizes culture as discursive practices in everyday life, reflecting not just a group's state at a given time but also evolving worldviews shaped by self-identifications and intercultural encounters. This aligns with Bhabha's (1994) theory of "cultural hybridity," which views culture as dynamic, conflictual, and transformative through ongoing encounters with racial or ethnic "others." Within this landscape, poststructuralism reveals how Japanese identity has evolved through historical intercultural interactions. To highlight the interplay between identity and culture, the course posed the central question: "What is Japanese?" The syllabus explored Japanese history across eras, examining ethnic and racial influences on identity, worldview, and cultural practices. For example, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Japanese "self" was shaped in response to the European "other," influencing religious practices and cultural artifacts. Simultaneously, Chinese migrants and their practices shaped Japanese culture. Analyzing such works enabled students to recognize the myth of an essentialized Japanese culture and appreciate its complexity. While the "self"/"other" binary may initially appear structuralist, the poststructuralist approach captures the hybrid and evolving nature of Japanese culture and identity. It bridges synchronic and diachronic aspects, acknowledging historicity and fluidity.

This approach was effective and well-received by students. It helped them deconstruct the view of Japanese as a single ethnicity and instead see hybridity. It also reminded them how their own racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds relate to Japanese identity. They were thus

able to see their "self" in the mirror of "other," and vice versa. For instance, students observed parallels between Japanese Ukiyo-e prints and European Impressionist paintings. They also examined the European Inquisition and slave trade through the mirror of Japanese Christian lords' trading of Japanese people and subsequent persecution of Christians during the 16th and 17th centuries. Such projection processes with intertwined viewpoints enabled students to re-examine and re-evaluate their own racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, while gaining an alternative view of the world as they perceived Japanese culture and history through the eyes of the Japanese "other." By the semester's end, students more deeply appreciated their racial and ethnic backgrounds and their historical connection to Japanese identity. They learned that the "self" and "other" are multi-dimensional, with multiple "others" shifting in the same eras. Many noted in their evaluations that they had learned the value of adopting alternative worldviews. This transformative experience helped them critically engage with identity and hybridity, deepening their understanding of Japanese culture and of themselves.

While this study analyzes two student papers in depth, they were illustrative rather than representative. Most students submitted final papers reflecting nuanced understanding of hybridity and identity. End-of-semester evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, with students commenting that the class helped them reconsider their cultural positions. One focal paper stood out because it revealed how deeply embedded essentialist discourses can remain—even in courses designed to challenge them. Rather than undermining the course, this underscores the enduring strength of cultural ideologies and the need for continued opportunities for critical reflection in language and culture education.

Assessment of Transcultural Competence in Japanese Language Education and Its Methodological Issues

Constructive learning experiences require effective assessment of learning objectives. The poststructuralist approach to teaching Japanese culture fosters "transcultural competence," encompassing both the ability to navigate languages and cultures and the capacity to view the world from others' perspectives (MLA, 2007). While the former can be partially achieved through knowledge-based methods, the latter requires cultivating learners' sensitivity and empathy for their linguistic and cultural "other." In this context, empathy is not merely an emotional response, but an evolving ethical stance—a willingness to apprehend and engage with another's perspective as accurately as possible (Hollan & Throop, 2011).

However, empathy as a moral and discursive dimension of transcultural competence has rarely been assessed in applied linguistics. This is partly because empathy has often been framed as a subjective affective state, typically approached through psychological or quantitative means, which pose limitations in educational settings. Measuring empathy in foreign language education remains a genuine challenge. Nevertheless, addressing it is essential, as arguably-the ultimate aim of language teaching is to foster intercultural citizenship (Porto & Byram, 2015) and promote cosmopolitan practice (Hull et al., 2010). The MLA (2007) emphasizes that university-level language education should form "a broader and more coherent curriculum where language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole" (p. 3) within "the context of humanistic learning" (p. 4). The goal is to develop learners as better human beings and global citizens who respect legitimate differences while retaining critical awareness. Successful language learning enables the recognition and construction of new spaces grounded in global ethics and universal human rights (Appiah, 2007; Byram & Guilherme, 2000; Hansen, 2010; Hull et al., 2010; Porto et al., 2018). In today's globalized

world, where diverse values and worldviews collide, intertwine, and evoke strong emotions, embracing empathy is essential for becoming a competent cosmopolitan citizen.

This study therefore approaches empathy not as a measurable psychological trait, but as a discursively constructed stance made visible through language use. It examines the moral dimension of transcultural competence, which the course aimed to cultivate throughout the semester. The poststructuralist approach, as outlined earlier, sought to dissolve the boundary between learners' perceptions of "self" and "other." Its goal was to foster empathy for learners' cultural "other," enabling them to construct proxy identities that transcend cultural boundaries. In line with this framework, the study analyzes two final papers, attending to how empathy is indexed, negotiated, or resisted through rhetorical choices and discursive positioning. These texts are not viewed as transparent windows into students' feelings, but as socially situated performances shaped by ideology, affect, and educational contexts.

By treating empathy as a socially and ideologically mediated representation rather than an inherent trait, this approach provides a nuanced understanding of how transcultural awareness emerges—or fails to emerge—in learner discourse. Comparing the two papers through sociolinguistic tools informed by poststructuralist theory (Blommaert, 2005) offers insights into the pedagogical possibilities and limitations of fostering empathy as an ethical orientation in language and culture education.

Data Collection and Selection Procedure

The data for this study's discourse analysis comprised two final papers written by individual students. At the semester's end, all students were tasked with writing about a Japanese cultural subject of their choice. The assignment aimed to deepen their interest while fostering analytical and research skills. It accounted for 30% of the final grade, and students dedicated substantial time to selecting topics such as Japanese popular music, history, animation, and film.

Students followed specific criteria: (1) choosing a Japanese cultural topic personally or culturally relevant to them, (2) discussing its historical and social significance, and (3) comparing it to their own culture, with an emphasis on similarity rather than difference. These guidelines aligned with the poststructuralist theory underpinning the course, encouraging students to challenge essentialized views and explore connections to their own backgrounds. The final assignment served as a valuable tool for evaluating curriculum effectiveness.

Students were informed that grading would be based on academic criteria, including research quality, coherent presentation, and logical argumentation. After the semester, I reviewed the papers again for research and curricular feedback. All students had signed informed consent forms approving the use of their work under conditions of anonymity.

The two papers selected for this study were chosen not for their representativeness, but for their discursive contrast. Both students selected the same cultural topic—*hikikomori*—and shared similar socio-economic and racial backgrounds, as well as histories of mental health challenges. They were highly motivated and earned the highest grades on the assignment. However, their papers diverged markedly in tone, rhetorical positioning, and representation of cultural "others." While many students' papers reflected critical engagement with hybridity, these two offered a unique opportunity to examine how students with similar profiles and academic performance can arrive at fundamentally different discursive constructions of empathy and identity. This contrast prompted a closer discourse analysis of the linguistic and ideological factors underlying these differences.

Participants

This study involves two African American male students enrolled in an introductory Japanese cultural course. Both wrote about *hikikomori*, a prominent Japanese social phenomenon associated with psychiatric issues such as depression and social anxiety. *Hikikomori* generally refers to "adolescents and young adults who become recluses in their parents' homes, unable to work or attend school for months or years" (Teo & Gaw, 2010, p. 444). Some classify it under existing ICD-10 psychiatric disorders, while others view it as a culturally specific syndrome of social withdrawal. The students' shared interest in the topic was shaped by personal experiences with emotional or psychological struggles during their adolescence. One student, "Mark," had previously experienced social anxiety while the other, "Kevin," reported symptoms of depression. Both came from low-income households, reflecting the socioeconomic and racial diversity of the university.

Like many in the course, the two may have found *hikikomori* personally resonant, identifying with aspects of alienation and pressure faced by Japanese youth. Despite this shared interest, their final papers reveal contrasting discursive orientations in how they represented the cultural "other" and responded to the course's ethical goals. This divergence serves as a focal point for examining how transcultural empathy and critical reflection are constructed—or constrained— through discourse.

Researcher and Researched

The teacher's identity and positionality must be acknowledged due to their potential impact on the data. The researcher, who also served as the course instructor, identifies as a native Japanese. Although lectures were conducted in English, her racialized embodiment, gender, and Japanese-accented English may have influenced how students positioned themselves in their writing. These factors might have encouraged a more contrastive stance toward the "imagined Japanese *hikikomori* youth" or heightened their awareness of cultural difference. Simultaneously, the instructor's identity and poststructuralist pedagogy likely shaped how students constructed proxy identities in relation to Japanese culture.

Rather than assuming neutrality, this analysis acknowledges this relational dynamic and views knowledge production as co-constructed. As Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) note in complexity theory, such factors produce overlapping and sometimes conflicting effects that shape both the researcher-researched relationship and the research itself. This orientation challenges the static notion of "objectivity," emphasizing instead a situated and reflexive understanding of the research process.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TWO PAPERS ON JAPANESE SOCIAL PHENOMENON *HIKIKOMORI*

The Case of Mark: Seeing "Other" in yhe Mirror of "Self"

This section examines how Mark discursively constructs his understanding of the *hikikomori* phenomenon by navigating between personal and imagined perspectives. Through his shifting use of personal pronouns and narrative stance, Mark positions himself in relation to Japanese youth, constructing a symbolic dialogue between "self" and "other." Drawing on Goffman's

notion of stance (1967, 1981) and Kramsch's theory of symbolic competence, this analysis explores how empathy emerges as a dynamic and reflective practice grounded in identity negotiation.

Mark, an African American male with a history of social anxiety disorder, was an engineering student with no prior experience in Japanese. He enrolled in the course due to a longstanding interest in Japanese anime culture. Mark was initially shy and reluctant to participate, attributing his nervousness to his social anxiety and unfamiliarity with the instructor and classmates. By the semester's end, he had become more engaged, actively contributing to discussions and presentations.

Mark's final paper was 11 pages long, including a cover page, introduction, research content, and bibliography. Salient linguistic features of his paper were analyzed at the syntactic level, focusing on the distribution of first, second, and third-person pronouns. These pronoun patterns signal rhetorical shifts and deeper discursive work—revealing how Mark constructs proximity, distance, and empathy through symbolic positioning.

Table 1

Distribution Of Subject Pronouns in Mark's Paper On hikikomori

Section	Number of "I"	Number of "You"	Number of "They"
Introduction	41	1(designate the instructor)	3 (general Japanese)
General Aspect	0	3(general audience)	4 (general Japanese)
Medical Aspect	0	5(general audience)	1(general Japanese)
Historical Aspect	0	5(general audience)	0
Socio-cultural Aspect	0	0	1(general Japanese)
Conclusion	13	15	3
Total	54	29	12

Mark used "I" extensively in the introduction (41 times), reflecting his personal connection to the topic. In the main sections, he used "you" sparingly (8 times), and "they" (12 times) to describe Japanese people, particularly *hikikomori.*

In the introduction, Mark framed his connection to *hikikomori* by recounting his struggles with bullying and social anxiety.

> When I was given the assignment to write my final paper for my Japanese culture class, I really wanted to find a subject that not only reflects the Japanese culture but also connects to me as a person.

He found *hikikomori* intriguing as a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, yet one with parallels to his own experiences. Reflecting on this, he asked:

> How could such an efficient, strong, and prideful culture keep up such a high standard in honor, education, and productivity without grinding down some of its people?

This projection reveals how Mark mapped his own experiences onto Japanese society, drawing parallels between the challenges faced in American and Japanese contexts. Mark reinforces this projection by referencing his own experiences of bullying and the trauma of social anxiety, as seen below:

> Growing up, I never excelled in school…the public and charter schools that I attended in my adolescence were full of bullies and my quiet demeanor made me a target…I started to hate school to the point where I would get physically sick and so I let fear and panic take control of me.

Mark's stance in this past narrative juxtaposes his younger self with Japanese *hikikomori* adolescents, many of whom were also victims of a high-pressure educational environment. Such symbolic positioning highlights his strong personal connection to the research and his empathetic engagement with its subjects. He then moves from the past to present:

> One of my biggest successes was discovering my inner strength…every day, I push myself to doing things that may seem easy or simple to many, but to me, it's a success on [sic] its right.

This temporal shift offers a fresh perspective on his past, highlighting his ability to overcome challenges and move forward. This navigation between stances is key to understanding his conclusion, as it reflects his evolving identity. He not only distances himself from his past but views it with calm confidence. More importantly, this shift enables him to project his experiences onto Japanese adolescents who became *hikikomori* due to societal pressures.

In sum, Mark's narrative of his past and present underscores his personal connection to the research. It illustrates a process of projection, where he identified with *hikikomori* youth, seeing their struggles as a mirroring his own as an underdog in a competitive society. His text exemplifies how a learner's personal narrative, refracted through a symbolic and poststructuralist lens, can foster a nuanced form of empathy—one that engages cultural difference dialogically and imaginatively.

Dialogue with "Imagined" Japanese: "Self" in the Mirror of "Others"

This section explores how Mark constructs empathy through rhetorical engagement with an imagined Japanese audience. In contrast to the personal narrative stance established in the introduction, the conclusion reveals a dynamic discursive interaction with *hikikomori* youth—symbolically constructed through shifts in pronouns, modal expressions, and face-work. Drawing on Kramsch's theory of symbolic competence, as well as Goffman's and Lakoff's frameworks, this analysis shows how empathy for cultural "others" can emerge through linguistic choices that position the self in dialogic relation to an imagined interlocutor. Mark's paper includes a well-researched and objective analysis of the *hikikomori* phenomenon. While that discussion is not detailed here, this section focuses on the conclusion, where his subjective stance aligns with the introduction. Each sentence or clause was numbered and categorized into six speech act groups (see Table 2), and modal usage was analyzed alongside pronoun shifts to uncover intentions and beliefs expressed across lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels.

Table 2

Speech Acts, Pronoun Usage, And Modalities in Mark's Paper

Speech Act	Pronoun (I)	Pronoun (You)	Modality
Talk about own experience (1-5)	5	2	Epistemic modality
Give advice (6-14)	0	7	Imperative mood Deontic modality Un-modalized assertion
Talk about own experience (15-19)	4	0	Epistemic modality
Give advice (20-23)	0	1	Direct Boulomaic modality Epistemic modality
Talk about own experience (24-25)	2	0	Epistemic modality
Give advice (26)	2	0	Boulomaic modality Epistemic modality

As indicated earlier, Mark's conclusion reflects a dialogue with imagined *hikikomori* adolescents. Two primary speech acts—"talking about his own experience" and "giving advice" —alternate throughout the conclusion. When discussing personal experiences, Mark predominantly uses epistemic modalities at both lexical and syntactic levels.

Excerpt 1

Line 2: I know first-hand how uncontrollable social fear can destroy your life.
Line 3: At one point, I could not even go to a drive-thru at a fast-food place without freaking out.
Line 5: The only way to better your situation is to try your best to face your fear.

In Line 2, Mark uses the modal lexical verb "know" to assert confidence in his understanding of social fear. The modal auxiliary "can" further emphasizes his awareness of its potential effects. Line 3, where he recounts a specific past experience, supports this claim by grounding his knowledge in personal suffering. These epistemic markers reflect a confident stance and a pragmatic effort to maintain positive face. In Lines 2 and 3, Mark aligns himself with imagined *hikikomori* adolescents, fostering solidarity and camaraderie (Lakoff, 1973). In Line 5, the epistemic marker "only" underscores his strong belief, positioning him as an experienced survivor of social anxiety. This leads naturally to his offer of advice. However, to minimize power differentials, he hedges in Line 4 by framing his suggestion as "my personal experience," thereby protecting negative face. This interplay of face-work illustrates Mark's non-hierarchical stance and empathy toward his imagined audience.

In contrast to the earlier epistemic modality, the following excerpt shows how Mark uses deontic forms to offer advice to his imagined audience.

Excerpt 2

Line 6: Take this process slow at your own pace.
Line 7: But you must try to force yourself to deal with problems head-on.
Line 8: When you or the people around you try to act like the problem doesn't exist,
Line 9: that's when things begin to worsen.

In Line 6, Mark uses the imperative verb "take," while in Line 7, he employs the deontic modal auxiliary "must" to convey obligation. These modal forms indicate both closeness and equality in social stance toward the imagined *hikikomori* audience. He maintains positive face by expressing active involvement. In Lines 8 and 9, Mark shifts to unmodalized assertions to provide causal reasoning. To soften his tone, he frames his views more generally, demonstrating deference and maintaining his negative face. This interplay of modality and face-work reflects his empathetic positioning. Through such strategic language use, he constructs the imagined *hikikomori* youth not as distant object of analysis but as interlocutors—mirroring both his past and his ethical stance. As his writing progressed, this dialogic stance becomes more explicit, deepening the projection of his past self onto the imagined Japanese adolescents.

After offering further advice to his imagined Japanese *hikikomori* audience, Mark shifts back to an introspective stance, using epistemic modality to reflect on personal experiences (Lines 15–19). He then moves again into a directive mode, employing a range of modal strategies in Lines 20–23. The following excerpt illustrates how these shifts shape his discursive perception of the imagined audience through alternating speech acts.

Excerpt 3

Line 15: Finding inner peace is one of the <u>biggest</u> key factors to get better (learn to love yourself).
Line 16: Taking medication was <u>never</u> an option for me.
Line 17: I <u>wanted</u> to do things myself.
Line 18: However, I know <u>people</u> that do take medication to repress <u>their</u> anxiety,
Line 19: and it <u>seems</u> to be working for <u>them</u>.
Line 20: With that said,
Line 21: if you <u>want</u> to get better but just can't find it within you to do
Line 22: <u>please go</u> consult a doctor.
Line 23: sometimes, medication is the only method to bettering a mental imbalance.

In Line 15, Mark uses the evaluative adverb "biggest" to affirm his belief in personal healing through self-acceptance. Lines 16 and 17 reinforce this stance through his rejection of medication and the boulomaic modality "wanted," which highlights personal agency. These lines echo his earlier narrative, where discovering inner strength marked a turning point in his struggle with social anxiety. In contrast to his earlier persuasive tone, Mark adopts a more neutral stance in Lines 18 and 19. He hedges that some people use medication for psychiatric conditions and suggests it may be effective—even though it was not his preference. By using a generalized third person ("people"), he discursively constructs "they," avoiding imposing on the imagined Japanese audience. The epistemic modal "seems" reflects both his knowledge of alternatives and his effort to preserve the audience's negative-face. Through this hedging, Mark shows respect for imagined audience readers who may seek different remedies. Following this

deference, he reengages by giving advice. The adverb "please" (Line 22) clearly expresses an empathetic stance and positive face orientation.

The discourse analysis of Mark's use of modalities and face-work reveals how he discursively constructs imagined Japanese *hikikomori* youth through a projection process rooted in his past. His shifting stance suggests that he was not merely engaging in dialogue but genuinely feeling empathy for his imagined audience. This phenomenon emerged from the dynamic projection process unfolding in multiple stages. Mark's effort to establish a personal connection to the topic—grounded in shared suffering—enabled him to view himself in the mirror of Japanese *hikikomori* youth. This common ground became a crucial contextual anchor, allowing him to project his past onto the research content and construct his imagined Japanese interlocutors with empathy and symbolic resonance. As his writing progressed, Mark deliberately shifted the position of a victim to that of a survivor retrospectively observing his past. By the conclusion, his memory of past suffering evoked empathy for the imagined Japanese youth, whom he treated as real. At that moment, memory and imagination intertwined to generate a "third space," where, as Kramsch explains, "two different symbolic systems, instead of conflicting with one another, find a way of operating together through an act of translation, creating new meanings in the process" (Kramsch, 2009, p. 200). In this space, Mark, not only saw the Japanese other in himself—imagining the unimaginable—but also extended care to them as if they were his peers.

The Case of Kevin: Oriental Discourse with "Imperial Eyes"

This section contrasts Mark's symbolic empathy with Kevin's discourse, which illustrates how Orientalist ideologies may persist even among students with extensive exposure to Japanese culture. Unlike Mark, who engaged in dialogic reflection through narrative and stance-shifting, Kevin reproduces essentialist and reductive image of Japan by uncritically echoing dominant cultural tropes. Drawing on Orientalism (Said, 1978), discourse and power (Foucault, 1977), this analysis examines how a lack of empathy and critical awareness can cause learners to reinforce global hierarchies.

Kevin, an African American male student double majoring in Japanese and business, had taken several Japanese-related courses and studied abroad for six months. He expressed strong interest in Japanese culture and aspired to work for a Japanese corporation. At first glance, he appears to embody the image of a "Japanophile." However, his writing on *hikikomori* and depression reveals how pervasive Orientalist narratives in U.S. culture can shape learners' perceptions— even among those with firsthand experience—if critical reflection is absent. Kevin's six-page final paper mirrored Mark's structure, covering historical, psychological, socioeconomic, and sociocultural aspects. However, unlike Mark, Kevin exhibited no contrastive use of first- and second-person pronouns or a dialogic engagement with imagined Japanese interlocutors. Consequently, analyzing first- and second-person pronouns in relation to speech acts—as done with Mark—would not yield meaningful insights in Kevin's case. Instead, as shown in Table 3, he employed "I" and "they" in contrastive ways.

Table 3

Pronoun Usage in Kevin's Paper by Thematic Section

Structure	Number of "I"	"You"	"They"
Introduction	8	0	5 5 = designates Japanese exchange students
General & Historical & Psychological Aspect	15 (1)	0	9 8 = Japanese people in general 1 = Japanese school children
Socio-economic Aspect	1 (1)	0	6 1 = Japanese people 5 = NEET & Otaku
Socio-cultural Aspect	5 (5)	0	5 3= Japanese people 2 = Japanese suicide victims
Conclusion	6 (1)	0	1 1= Japanese people
Total	35	0	26

Kevin used "they" to objectify the Japanese people as research subjects, while using "I" to assert his authorial stance. Although such contrast is not uncommon in in student writing, what stands out is how his use of "I" is closely tied to the epistemic modal "I believe." This pattern reinforces an Orientalist stance, portraying the Japanese as a generalized "other."

In his analysis of hikikomori, Kevin introduces what he calls the "KITY" mindset—short for "Keep It to Yourself" —as a central explanatory concept. He argues that Japanese society discourages open discussion of mental health, resulting in untreated depression and social withdrawal. In the introduction, he writes:

> From the little experience I've had communicating with Japanese people, I found this statement (KITY) to be quite accurate as they rarely have ever brought up subjects that were troubling them and would often dismiss me if I showed concerned about their troubles…I believe (emphasis added) it's because of the "KITY" mindset that Japan has such a struggle when it comes to dealing with depression.

Here, "they" clearly refers to past Japanese acquaintances, while "I believe" signals his subjective claim. This early framing, though initially plausible, becomes increasingly assertive as his paper progresses.

In the body of his paper, Kevin repeatedly uses "I believe" to assert that the KITY mindset is the root cause of multiple societal problems in Japan. He links it not only to untreated depression and *hikikomori*, but also to low birthrates, youth isolation, and even economic decline:

> *I believe* that because of depression (caused by the KITY mindset), many Japanese people have used anime, pop idols and video games as an escape from reality (and become an Otaku) .... Regarding these Otakus, 67% of people were not married, and *I believe* this plays a reason into why Japanese birthrates are so low. These articles also states [sic] that one in three Japanese high school students have never gone on a date or been in a romantic relationship. *I believe* that the majority of these numbers are linked due to the lack of treatment with Japanese depression. The Japanese are too ashamed to let others know they can't handle things on their own and unfortunately, they have to pay the price by being subjected to isolation… (Regarding the high suicide rate in Japan), *I believe* that these numbers indicate that the majority of these suicide had to deal with stress, which leads to an unbearable depression. *I believe* that these factors arise due to the "KITY" mindset, and *I believe* that many of these unfortunate cases could have been avoided, if they were just to speak how they feel." (Emphasis mine.)

Among 20 first-person uses in the main section, 7 are paired with "I believe" (See Table 3). This epistemic modality underscores Kevin's strong conviction while simultaneously performing an "American self" positioned against a generalized "Japanese other." His repeated assertion of causal links—without addressing broader economic, cultural, or historical complexity—reveals an essentialist framework shaped by Orientalist assumptions.

A number of Kevin's arguments are problematic in their assumption that key social and economic issues in Japan are direct consequences the KITY mindset. He claims that Japan's economic decline stems from the low productivity of *hikikomori*, whom he conflates with NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) and Otaku youth. This conflation erases important distinctions, treating diverse social groups as a single stigmatized population. Moreover, by framing *hikikomori* as mentally ill and "unemployable," Kevin reinforces a medicalized and reductive view of these individuals. His argument extends this logic to explain low birthrates and high suicide rates, attributing them to emotional repression. Such sweeping generalizations ignore structural economic factors—like the post-bubble recession—and reduce complex cultural phenomena to simplified psychological traits. Failing to account for the complexity of Japanese social phenomena, Kevin concludes with a revealing statement:

> Every day, I read more and more about Japan, and I gain more understanding on how fortunate I am as an American.

This final remark encapsulates a broader Orientalist stance, framing Japan not simply as culturally different but as deficient. By contrasting his "fortunate" American identity with a pathologized view of Japanese society, Kevin reproduces the binary of a rational, emotionally open West versus an emotionally repressed East. Rather than engaging dialogically with the other, he distances himself from it through implicit cultural superiority.

Ideologically biased judgments about Japan's culture, society, and people are not uncommon among Japanese majors. Japanese cultural content courses are often taught from a structuralist, knowledge-based perspective, encouraging learners to view Japan as "other" and to label observed phenomena in their analyses. Unfortunately, the tradition of studying foreign cultures remains rooted in the anthropological practice of examining the "other." Kubota (1999) points out that Japan's "exotic" image has been co-constructed not only by non-Japanese observers but also by Japanese themselves. The phenomenon of "*Nihonjin-ron*" (theories of Japaneseness), for example, reflects the active participation of Japanese in

articulating essentialist and exceptionalist view of their own culture. The danger of this structuralist view of Japanese "self" and "other" lies in its reproduction of hidden ideologies shaped by global power relations, especially in Japan's postwar context. The notion of the "noble savage" has long implied a dual image of the "uncivilized" subject in Orientalist discourse. Beyond academic representations, Kevin's perspective also reflects postwar American socio-cultural discourse, which portrayed the Japanese as culturally deficient "others" (Dower, 1993, 2000; Shibusawa, 2006). Considering the ideologies surrounding Japan, Kevin's misunderstandings and biased judgments may stem from his prior immersion in a structuralist instructional paradigm. If the key difference between the two students lies in their respective exposure to Japanese language and culture, Kevin's greater experience seems to have undermined, rather than enhanced, his empathy toward the subject. As Dewaele and Li (2012) argue, deeper cultural exposure does not necessarily foster empathy; the type and context of that exposure are crucial. As Foucault (1977) reminds us, anyone—regardless of ethnic or social background—can act as an agent of dominant discourses, including Orientalism. In sum, Kevin's paper illustrates the pitfalls of cultural learning when empathy for the "other" and critical awareness of Orientalist ideology are absent. This lack of reflection enabled him not only to stereotype Japanese people, culture, and society, but also to reproduce a binary view of a rational, civilized American "self" versus an irrational, deficient Japanese "other." Despite his apparent affinity for *hikikomori* youth, his framing ultimately distances them, viewing them through what Pratt (1992) terms "imperial eyes."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparison of the two students' final papers raises critical questions about the aims of foreign language education. Traditionally, language and cultural learning has sought to broaden learners' perspectives and deepen their understanding of the world. To achieve these aims, curricula often integrate content-based studies of the target culture with language instruction. However, as the present comparison shows, such an approach can inadvertently reproduce Orientalist ideologies. Cultural learning risks constructing the learner's "self" in contrast to a cultural "other" within dominant discursive frameworks. A poststructuralist approach to teaching Japanese culture offers significant potential to challenge this boundary. It may support the development of empathy for the cultural "other" and encourage a more nuanced understanding of culture and identity as dynamic and multidimensional concepts. Observations from this comparative analysis suggest the potential limitations of traditional assessment tools in capturing the ethical and transformative dimension of learners' development as cosmopolitan citizens. These limitations are evident in learners' final papers, which reflect how prior education shapes their worldviews. Conventional assessments of research papers emphasize content knowledge and logical development. While valued for objectivity, such criteria fall short in addressing the transnational demands of today's global society. There is a growing need for alternative tools that measure not only what students know, but also how they engage critically and empathetically with cultural difference. As the 2007 MLA report emphasizes, university-level language education must help students "reflect on the world and themselves through another language and culture" (p.4)—a goal requiring more holistic and humanistic forms of evaluation.

As demonstrated above, discourse analysis may offer valuable insights as an alternative assessment tool —not for grading per se, but for offering open-ended interpretive feedback. Informed by poststructuralist and sociolinguistic perspectives, it provides a lens to explore

how learners see the "self" through the "other," and vice versa. It also illuminates how students imagine their "unimaginable" others and whether they recognize them as equally human. The poststructuralist lens captured the fluid, discursive nature of identity in student writing. The sociolinguistic framework enabled an analysis of emotional involvement as indexed in language use, while offering a grounded basis for identifying discursive traces of empathy. These perspectives together show how learners' experiences can evoke empathy and construct cosmopolitan subjectivities through symbolic projection. This suggests that learners may approach their foreign subject not merely through difference, but by recognizing resonant experiences and shared humanity. In the grading process, both papers were evaluated using conventional academic criteria such as grammar, organization, and research quality. However, discourse analysis also informed individualized feedback, especially for Kevin. He received comments on his tendency to generalize Japanese social issues through an American lens. The goal was not to criticize him personally, but to encourage greater reflexivity and empathetic engagement with cultural analysis. It is important to emphasize that discourse analysis does not measure whether students "feel" more empathy than others. Instead, it offers a lens to evaluate how a curriculum fosters symbolic and transcultural engagement. As noted, more than half the class demonstrated strong emotional and analytical investment, with many students reflecting critically on both Japanese and their own cultural backgrounds. Kevin's case, though exceptional, illustrates that Orientalist framing may persist even in students with considerable exposure to the target culture. This underscores the importance of continued reflection on pedagogical coherence and curricular design, particularly those informed by poststructuralist theory and cosmopolitan ethics.

Discourse analysis thus serves as both a diagnostic and developmental tool: it helps identify moments of dissonance or ideological reproduction, while also supporting the refinement of pedagogical practices. In sum, this study points to the potential pedagogical value of discourse analysis as a means of exploring and assessing aspects of transcultural competence and empathy in language education. It offers instructors a way to engage with student writing not merely as evidence of knowledge acquisition, but as discursive performances of ethical stance and cultural positioning—core dimensions of what the MLA (2007) describes as translingual and transcultural learning.

Research Implications and Methodological Considerations

This study underscores the value of discourse analysis as a formative assessment tool for evaluating learners' transcultural competence, and as a complementary lens for analyzing the impact of curricula and pedagogy. However, several research implications and methodological concerns merit consideration for future refinement. Continued research with larger and more diverse datasets is needed to identify consistent patterns and generate generalizable findings. Such studies could further validate discourse analysis as a tool for exploring symbolic and ethical dimensions of learner discourse. Additionally, contrastive research comparing instructional paradigms (e.g., poststructuralist vs. content-based) could clarify the pedagogical affordances of symbolic and critical approaches in fostering transcultural competence and reshaping learner worldviews.

Methodologically, both researcher and instructor—whether the same or distinct—must reflect on their positionality and its effects on the data. As poststructuralist theory highlights, learner identities are relational and shaped by perceived power dynamics. In this case, Kevin's Orientalist stance may have been shaped in part by his perceived relationship to

the instructor, a Japanese culture scholar. Future research could benefit from triangulating data through journals, reflections, or interviews to further explore these dynamics.

Finally, learners' personal histories and socio-affective conditions—including trauma, mental health and social and economic background—must be considered when interpreting empathy-related data. These factors may shape a learner's capacity to access, express, or sustain empathy. Insights from neuroscientific research provide a useful interdisciplinary perspective: for instance, fMRI studies show that empathy involves specific neural pathways (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2005) and is linked to oxytocin-mediated hormonal activity (Hurlemann et al., 2010； Nummenmaa et al., 2008). These findings suggest that empathy is not solely a discursive or cultural construct, but a biologically mediated, multidimensional phenomenon. Applied linguistics would benefit from greater attention to neurodiversity and mental health variability when theorizing empathy as an educational goal—and from examining how such diversity intersects with learners' agency in intercultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This paper reexamined the role of empathy in fostering transcultural competence in foreign language education. It highlights the value of discourse analysis as a tool for assessing transcultural engagement and affirms the relevance of poststructuralist approaches in pedagogical and curricular design. As globalization transforms the landscape of language education, its purpose must extend beyond teaching linguistic skills and cultural facts. It should encompass how language, symbolic systems, and cultural practices shape learners' subjectivities and ethical orientations. This study suggests that empathy for the cultural "other" may not be merely an emotional goal, but a symbolic and discursive act that has the potential to dissolve ideological boundaries between "self" and "other." Through such processes, learners may begin to position themselves as ethical cosmopolitan subjects.

Given these implications, educators are encouraged to engage more deeply with the philosophical and ethical dimensions of language education. Both teachers and students must develop critical awareness of the Orientalist assumptions and power relations embedded in educational contexts. Discourse analysis can help illuminate these dynamics—fostering classrooms that are not only more critical and reflective, but also more empathetic and inclusive. Ultimately, cultivating empathy through symbolic engagement may be one of language education's most powerful contributions to a more interconnected and humane global future.

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