

Picturebooks to Challenge Learners' Viewpoints in Japanese Language Instruction: Critical Multiculturalism Perspective

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Abstract

This article provides practical strategies for language educators to utilize picturebooks in nurturing learners' critical perspectives. It emphasizes the importance of encouraging students to challenge their established viewpoints within the framework of critical multicultural education. By adopting a critical lens when engaging with picturebooks, learners are empowered to explore and critically examine the power dynamics embedded within various cultures, facilitating the recognition of their own privilege and its impact on society. Picturebooks that depict characters from diverse backgrounds can prompt discussions about privilege, empathy, and social justice. The article includes a comprehensive analysis of a carefully selected picturebook, along with recommended pedagogical techniques for cultivating critical reading skills. These insights assist educators in designing instructional content that expands and challenges learners' perspectives. This approach fosters open-mindedness, counters biases, and stimulates proactive engagement among learners, ultimately leading to a more equitable and inclusive society. By leveraging the unique qualities of picturebooks, educators can create a dynamic and transformative learning environment that supports critical thinking and social awareness.

Keywords: Picturebooks, Critical Multiculturalism, Japanese Language Instruction, Higher education

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Introduction

As societies diversify, the need to promote inclusivity in education intensifies. Such an environment fosters recognition and acceptance of differences among individuals, reshaping perspectives toward impartiality, fairness, and respect (Koss, 2015; Sanger & Gleason, 2020). Critical multiculturalism offers a lens through which diversity can be interpreted. Kubota (2004) contends that a critical outlook on multiculturalism enables learners to see societal inequities as well as the power and privilege of cultural essentialism.

While such a claim of the importance of diversity may sound commonsensical, effectively including such discussion in teaching may not be straightforward. Ironically, that is particularly challenging in language courses, because language courses, especially in introductory levels, actually tend to focus on stereotypical views of other cultures (Heinrich, 2005; Kumagai, 2014).

Carefully selected picturebooks with appropriate pedagogical strategies, however, can be an effective vehicle to facilitate such discourse. Visual cues can aid the interpretation of a storyline for beginner learners. Visual elements, coupled with a written story, can garner not only the learners' curiosity but also stimulate diverse interpretations of a given situation. While naturally and organically creating an inclusive learning environment, picturebooks can promote and challenge diverse perspectives.

Thus, this study proposes a unique but practical approach to incorporating picturebooks into language courses, particularly those in Japanese. Picturebooks, with their multimodality, can have multicultural significance because they engage learners in exploring diverse viewpoints and challenging norms. They can also promote critical thinking about societal issues when carefully selected and effectively presented (Kress, 2010; Janks, 2010) and they are abundantly available. However, the application of picturebooks from critical multicultural perspectives in higher education has been sparingly investigated. Furthermore, the use of picturebooks in college-level Japanese language courses has been inadequately explored. In this context, "college-level" refers to higher education courses designed to develop advanced language proficiency and critical thinking, engaging students with more complex materials than those at earlier educational stages. This study addresses these gaps through critical literacy and linguistic analyses.

The central research question guiding this study is: How can the integration of picturebooks into college-level Japanese language courses promote critical multicultural perspectives and enhance learners' critical thinking skills? To explore this, the study examined the implementation of Jon Scieszka's picturebook, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs!* in a college-level Japanese course. This book offers a unique narrative twist on a classic fairy tale, making it an ideal text for challenging learners' preconceived notions and encouraging deeper engagement with multiple perspectives. Through a critical literacy framework and a critical multicultural lens, this story becomes a compelling

tool for guiding learners to question norms, appreciate diverse viewpoints, and understand the sociopolitical and multicultural implications of storytelling. By investigating how such picturebooks can stimulate critical thinking about cultural diversity, power, and privilege, the study aims to provide insights into creating a more inclusive and reflective learning environment in higher education Japanese language courses.

First, the discussion on critical multiculturalism, critical literacy, visual literacy, and the advantages of integrating picturebooks into language courses, particularly for adult learners, is reviewed. Subsequently, a practical example of learning with picturebooks, using Scieszka's book is provided, offering Japanese language educators concrete strategies for designing classroom activities and discussions grounded in critical literacy principles. These strategies aim to demonstrate how learners can recognize conflicts, power dynamics, and latent privileges, thus fostering dialogue on various topics. The article concludes with deliberation and prospective research directions. In the Appendix, a selection of picturebooks addressing various topics, including social issues, is listed along with brief explanations. These picturebooks cover a wide range of themes, providing educators with additional resources to further explore critical literacy and multiculturalism in their teaching.

Literature Review

Critical Multiculturalism

Learning multiple languages exposes individuals to diverse cultural perspectives. However, language classes often introduce culture briefly, omitting issues that affect under-represented groups such as racism, discrimination, inequity, and human rights. Liberal multiculturalism, while emphasizing cultural differences and uniqueness, often provides superficial and stereotypical images of foreign languages and cultures. This oversimplification reinforces "power evasion" caused by difference-blindness (Kubota, 2004) and fails to address material issues in society, overlooking internal diversity and marginalizing certain groups (Nieto & Bode, 2013).

The simplified descriptions of sociolinguistics in Japanese textbooks can mislead learners into thinking Japanese language and society are homogeneous, idealizing the educated urban population while sidelining variations such as regional dialects and immigrant cultures. This fosters inaccurate linguistic and cultural ideologies (Heinrich, 2005; Kumagai, 2014).

A critical approach to teaching multiculturalism overcomes these limitations. Kubota (2004) argues that critical multicultural education explicitly recognizes social and economic inequities, examining how and why certain racial groups are systematically oppressed. Unlike the liberal stance, which views prejudice arising from individual perceptions and achievements are the results of individual efforts and abilities, critical multiculturalism explores systematic oppression and its impact on educational decisions, helping learners understand how culture normalizes injustice. Research suggests

that critical multicultural education provides learners with opportunities to recognize how culture normalizes things causing injustices. It also encourages the examination of power dynamics related to race, wealth, and gender, revealing how power and privilege benefit certain groups (Banks, 2004; Black & Stone, 2005; Kubota, 2010).

Kubota (2010) insists that language education must raise learners' critical awareness of inequity and discrimination, engaging them in discussions about societal perceptions. Furthermore, Kubota et al. (2003) suggest the comprehensive examination of language and culture functions to develop unbiased attitudes toward different racial groups, encouraging reflections on personal and societal perceptions to deepen understanding of social justice (Nieto, 2012).

Picturebooks can play a crucial role in this approach. As valuable educational materials, they portray diverse narrative voices, character interactions, and power dynamics within communities (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Picturebooks of the right topics, as listed in this article, can enrich language education by providing concrete examples of how power operates and how cultures evolve. Through their stories and illustrations, picturebooks can reveal subtle mechanisms of power, such as whose voice is heard and unheard, and how characters are portrayed in terms of authority and influence. They offer vivid, accessible stories that can illustrate complex social issues and identity dimensions, helping learners recognize and question the stereotypes and biases present in traditional educational materials (Dolan, 2014). By incorporating picturebooks within the pedagogical framework and strategies, educators can create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment that fosters critical thinking and empathy, encouraging students to reflect on their own identities and societal roles.

Critical Literacy and Picturebooks as Multimodal Media

Picturebooks allow learners to comprehend how construction, design, and meaning-making work, while fostering critical awareness of social issues. They support comprehension, discussion, and challenging of those issues in novel ways (Well et al., 2022). Simple stories and clear themes in carefully selected picturebooks are advantageous for adult learners by enhancing vocabulary, grammar, and intercultural understanding (Yomo et al., 2014). Featuring diverse perspectives, picturebooks encourage acceptance of ambiguity and multiple interpretations, promoting tolerance and critical thinking. They also provide relational contexts that highlight fairness and justice, prompting empathy and social action through increased awareness of different cultures and perspectives (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2012; Lysaker & Sedberry, 2015).

Approaching language materials from a critical perspective involves understanding the underlying discourse and power relations that shape culture and communication (Collins, 1998). Picturebooks, as multimodal media, are particularly valuable in this context. The interplay between images and words can enhance comprehension and provide multiple entry points for discussion and

analysis. Decoding and encoding meaning from various modes within a single text requires learners to understand and engage with the blend of sociocultural, visual, and linguistic elements that create multimodal text (Kress, 2010; Serafini, 2014).

Educators should empower learners to engage with picturebooks to interpret the multiple modes simultaneously allowing them to question power dynamics, biases, and meanings within social and cultural contexts (Wells et al., 2022). For instance, through visual imagery, picturebooks can depict societal hierarchies, cultural nuances, or implicit biases that are not explicitly addressed in the written language. This prompts learners to analyze both the written textual material (hereon, written texts) and visual representations, fostering a deeper understanding of complex social issues (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2012).

Labbas (2015) highlights that critical literacy involves unveiling power relations, inequalities, and injustices in texts. Picturebooks, with their rich narratives and visual elements, serve as potent tool for this purpose, reflecting societal norms and values. Analyzing these elements enables learners to uncover underlying messages and ideologies in stories, empowering them to explore power dynamics, promote transformative change, and take action while considering the author's perspective and their choice of ideas (Norris et al., 2012).

Janks (2010) adds that critical literacy empowers young people to interpret written texts and the world in relation to their power, identity, and access to knowledge. Literacy is deeply shaped by power dynamics and ideologies rather than neutral acts (Janks, 2010). Picturebooks can reflect and reinforce existing power structures, which privilege some groups while marginalizing others, shaping readers' perceptions of the world. The visual components in picture books, such as illustrations and layout, often play a significant role in conveying these messages; they can be critically examined to reveal how they contribute to the narrative's ideological stance.

Examining how power operates in literacy practices helps learners to recognize and resist oppressive ideologies and strive for equity and social justice. Picturebooks, with their blend of visual and textual storytelling, provide a unique platform for this type of analysis. They offer opportunities to discuss and critique how different identities, values, and behaviors are represented and to question the norms depicted in the stories. Thus, picturebooks play a crucial role in this process by providing accessible, engaging, and multifaceted texts that can be used to explore and understand complex socio-political issues and cultural narratives in a language learning context.

Visual Literacy through Picturebooks

To fully experience the multimodality in picturebooks, and thereby construct meaning, learners must address all semiotic systems of meaning (Serafini & Reid, 2022, p. 3). All texts, including written texts and visual representations, are social artifacts that appear in particular contexts and practices

(Goldstein, 2016). In education, visual literacy refers to the ability to critically examine visual media as texts using cognitive strategies such as visualizing, summarizing, and asking questions for comprehension (Thompson & Beene, 2023). The textual analysis of visual signs allows learners to assess credibility, make inferences, analyze visual rhetoric, recognize power dynamics, and understand the social implications of the visuals (Ferreira & Newfield, 2014). Thus, language learners should have the opportunity to recognize and critically interpret visual representations to interrogate the messages they convey and become visually literate.

The questions shown in Table 1, adjusted for use in picturebooks, enhance the critical reading of images. A selection of questions is suggested depending on the picturebook and the goals of a lesson.

Table 1. Questions to Help Learners Analyze Images in Picturebooks

Phase	Questions
1. Before Reading the Written Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is going on here? • What do you see that makes you say that? • What more can you find? • Name everything you see in the image, then identify underlying emotions, communication, and context. • Who is in the image? Who is missing? • Whose viewpoint is expressed?
2. Interpersonal, Ideational, and Textual Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What elements are visible in the foreground and background? • How is the image framed or composed? • From what angle or point of view is the image presented? • Which parts of the image are centrally focused? • What has been altered, omitted, or included in the image?
3. After Reading the Written Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the written texts impact your view of the image? • Do you see anything you initially missed? • Does your stance toward the image change? • How did your opinion or reaction to the image evolve with added context? • What about the added context prompts further investigation (of the image, other resources, etc.)? • How does evaluating an image compare to evaluating a written text?

The question set 1 is drawn from *Problem Posing* (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) and *Visual Thinking Strategies* (Yenawine, 2013). Focusing on visual images before reading the written texts allows learners to carefully observe elements often overlooked when reading alongside the written texts. This set of questions prompts learners to share perspectives, enhancing communication, critical thinking, and creativity (Moeller et al., 2013; Yeom, 2018).

The second set is based on Painter et al.'s (2013) framework. It simplifies the semiotics of picturebooks under three heads: interpersonal (characters, interactions, and text-reader environment); ideational (subject matter and image relationships); and textual (layout and composition). Under this framework, picturebooks' elements such as colors, gaze, and the direction orientation of characters are analyzed (Serafini, 2010, 2011). In language classes, it is suggested that learners be guided in critically

analyzing images so that they are not overwhelmed by the technical details of all the elements. Educators may reference the elements as necessary to help learners analyze.

The third set of questions is adopted from Thompson & Beene's (2023) scaffolded slow looking exercise, which is designed to enhance learners' visual analysis through observation and critical thinking skills.

Example Classroom Practices using a Picturebook

To illustrate practices by which picturebooks can effectively contribute to the development of learners' critical literacy in Japanese courses, this section provides a specific example illustrating the implementation of a picturebook, *Sanbiki no Kobuta no Honto no Hanashi* (originally written by Scieszka (1989), titled *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs!*), in Japanese courses.

Traditional folktales contain beliefs, customary habits, and universal human struggles, that are rich resources for young readers to understand the world. Reproduced fairy tales challenge the beliefs and attitudes of traditional tales with reconstructed ideologies and social beliefs. They reformat the tale to include serious current morals, thus helping learners to re-examine their perspectives, and "provide narrative tactics that can either promulgate correct behavior or question social practices" (Kelley, 2008). This picturebook is a humorous retelling of the classic *Three Little Pigs* story from the perspective of the Big Bad Wolf, named Alexander "Al" Wolf. He argues that he visited the pigs to borrow a cup of sugar to bake a cake for his sick grandmother. However, by sneezing, he accidentally blew down their houses, killing the first two pigs. He explains his innocent intentions, claiming that all three pigs were mean and insulted him and tried to portray him as the villain, despite his being polite. The story playfully challenges the original narrative, allowing learners to engage in critical thinking and question assumptions about culpability.

This picturebook offers valuable material for analysis based on critical literacy. Among various critical literacy frameworks, this study draws on Lewison et al.'s (2002) four-dimensional framework to analyze this book within the context of critical multiculturalism.

1) **Disrupting commonplace:** Learners are encouraged to question the routines, beliefs, habits, and understandings prevalent in daily life. By challenging norms, such as the traditional narrative of the *Three Little Pigs*, they can gain fresh perspectives that enable them to interpret texts or situations unconventionally. This book's alternative viewpoint prompts learners to reconsider what they have taken for granted about the story and to explore the implications of seeing it from the wolf's perspective. This aligns with the goal of critical multiculturalism to challenge dominant narratives and highlight marginalized perspectives.

2) **Interrogating multiple viewpoints:** When comparing the differences between this book and the original story, learners engage in discussions on the storyline, theme, characters, omitted parts, and

potential changes, and how those things affect the story and the intentions of the author. This allows them to explore and embrace different identities, values, and behaviors they see in their lives. By analyzing this picturebook from the wolf's perspective, learners are prompted to consider texts from the vantage points of various characters, or those not explicitly represented within the text. This approach encourages a deeper understanding of how different perspectives can reshape narratives and highlight the subjectivity of storytelling.

3) Focusing on socio-political issues: Learners explore the power dynamics between authors and readers, examining how certain characters are deprived of benefits while others enjoy them, and questioning whose interests are served by these representations (Kelley, 2008). The picturebook can be analyzed to reveal underlying messages about justice, bias, and the portrayal of different characters, thus encouraging learners to think critically about power relations in society. The shift in power relations from the original tale in this picturebook highlights how fairy tales guide mores, values, gender, and power in a civilizing process (Kelley, 2008). Analyzing the fractured version of the tale allows learners to critique traditional stereotypes and reflect on broader societal norms and power structures, thus emphasizing issues of justice and fairness.

4) Taking action and promoting social justice: One of the goals of critical multiculturalism is to empower individuals to challenge and transform unjust systems and practices. This framework empowers learners to act through rectifying inappropriate or unequal power dynamics to effect change and transform the prevailing status quo. By engaging with the post-reading practices in the following section, learners can be inspired to take action to challenge dominant narratives and promote more equitable viewpoints, thereby applying critical literacy principles to advocate for social change.

Lesson Ideas with *Sanbiki no Kobuta no Honto no Hanashi*

Strategies introduced in this section, such as *Problem Posing*, *Alternative Texts*, and *Perspective Journal*, can be effectively applied in foreign language classes to develop language skills, critical literacy, and awareness of social matters. Additionally, educators have the flexibility of selecting and tailoring these practices based on the specific picturebooks they use and their lesson objectives. Suggested lesson structure, as presented in this section, caters to intermediate-level or higher Japanese learners based on the need for content and imagery analysis, coupled with expressing personal thoughts. The list in the appendix is a summary of additional suggested picturebooks that cover a variety of social/cultural topics to which these practices can be applied across different levels.

Table 2. Example Classroom Practice for *Sanbiki no Kobuta no Honto no Hanashi*

Practice	Activity	Description
Pre-reading (60 min)	1. Review the Original Tale	Recap the traditional <i>Three Little Pigs</i> story, focusing on key literary elements: setting (when and where), characters (who), plot (events/conflict), point of view (narrator), and theme (underlying meaning).
	2. Problem Posing Questions	Guide learners in discussing key questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is present or absent? • Whose viewpoint is expressed? • What are the author’s intentions? • Who benefits from the story? • What power relations are evident? • Which characters benefit or fail to benefit?
Main reading (60–120 min)	1. Image Analysis	Analyze images (cover, title page, end page) to encourage detailed observation. Refer to question sets in Table 1-1 for guidance.
	2. Text Comparison	Read and compare the book’s narrative with the original tale, noting differences in tone, character perspective, and plot details.
	3. Discuss Perspective	Reflect on how the wolf’s perspective changes the interpretation of events: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this viewpoint alter the moral of the story? • What new insights about justice, empathy, or fairness emerge?
	4. Image Analysis After Reading	Re-examine the images with new understanding, using question set in Table 1-3 as a guide.
Post-reading (60 min)	Choose Activity	Select one or two activities for creative response: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write an article for <i>The Daily Wolf</i> or <i>The Daily Pig</i> defending one side. • Write an alternative ending or fairy tale from a different character’s viewpoint. • Create a Perspective Journal reflecting on the story’s message.

Pre-reading Practice

Pre-reading practice 1 serves to enhance learners’ sequential storytelling abilities, fostering a deeper understanding of the story’s foundational components. Following this review, learners engage in *Problem Posing* (Pre-reading 2), a critical discussion strategy that encourages questioning beyond surface-level comprehension (Kelley, 2008; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Thus, learners analyze the text from various perspectives in preparation for comparing it to the fractured tale in the main reading.

Main Reading

Main reading 1 focuses on the visuals in the book before tackling written texts. This encourages learners to interpret images critically, recognize symbols, infer meaning, and understand visual rhetoric. Additionally, as visuals can convey information and perspectives that may not be stated in the written text, by focusing on visuals first, learners are encouraged to consider multiple perspectives and interpretations in order to enrich their understanding of the material. Learners then unravel how the written texts and visual representations collaborate to convey meaning (Main reading 2 through 4).

The multimodal ensemble in this book involves written texts and illustrations with a mix of detailed and cartoonish styles to present the wolf's perspective, challenging the conventional narrative. Here, visual elements such as color, detail of artwork, gaze, and focalization are analyzed based on Painter et al. (2013)'s visual analysis method. For instance, the cover, featuring an article about Al Wolf in a newspaper, portrays a wolf blowing away pigs, interestingly with a pig as the reader, despite the newspaper being named "The Daily Wolf." The overall tone of the book comprises dark, brownish colors, emphasizing the story's extraordinariness. The detailed yet not hyper-realistic artwork evokes empathy for the wolf. When the wolf introduces his story, he gazes directly at readers, trying to establish his innocence through direct communication, which gives him authority over the narrative. The portrayal of the wolf as calm and trustworthy breaks typical wolf stereotypes. However, the dark tone throughout the book may make readers doubt his credibility. In contrast, the pigs are not clearly depicted in the images, with only two scenes showing them with evil expressions. In one instance, the focus shifts to Al's perspective as he looks through a small window of the pig's house, creating an interactive experience for learners and helping them understand the sociological and cultural context. Images of the pigs only show parts of their bodies, avoiding individual portrayals, which in turn may challenge stereotypes and offer a fresh perspective on the traditional story.

The reversal of roles between the wolf and the pigs challenges learners to reevaluate assumptions about authority in storytelling, questioning the absolute truth of the original narrative and inviting exploration of multiple viewpoints. The wolf's unconventional depiction with humanized traits aims to shift perspectives, urging empathy for a character traditionally labeled as a villain. His use of Japanese sentence-ending particles such as *na*, *sa*, *ka*, *yo*, and *ze*, adds emotional depth; it shapes credibility and perspective, and influences power dynamics in the text and learner perception. When the police and media arrive at the third pig's house, they are portrayed as pig shadows, challenging stereotypes and asserting the wolf's innocence. This examination deepens learners' understanding by encouraging them to embrace different viewpoints and consider the complexities of power dynamics within the narrative.

Post-reading Practices

By crafting an article for a newspaper that appears in the story, either as the Daily Wolf or the Daily Pig, a post-reading activity offers a unique opportunity to assume the role of an editor of either paper; this facilitates the discussion of which narrative is more trustworthy and exploration of marginalized community perspectives. This activity helps learners critically assess multiple perspectives within the story, fostering a deeper understanding of the narrative's complexities and encouraging empathy toward different viewpoints. For instance, the wolf's demeanor and earnest appearance, polite way of speaking, thoughtfulness for his sick grandmother, and the negative portrayal of the pigs evoke empathy from the learners. Should learners analyze these as a genuine story or a manipulation of

perception? This discussion can extend to analyzing how stories are told, highlighting the role of narrative bias, storytelling techniques, and the impact of different perspectives in media and literature. Through such evaluation, learners practice discernment and critical thinking skills as they weigh the validity, reasoning, and reliability of each character's viewpoint. This process prompts deeper reflection on biases, assumptions, and subjective interpretations, fostering a more nuanced understanding of how different narratives shape perceptions and influence storytelling. Ultimately, it cultivates a critical perspective for analyzing conflicting viewpoints and encourages learners to consider diverse approaches before forming conclusions or judgments.

Another post-reading practice involves writing an *Alternative Text* for a different ending to a story. Learners choose a perspective to champion and explain their choices by drawing on their analyses of text and images; reimagining well-known tales from different perspectives adds depth to critical perspectives. This activity sheds light on media bias in prevailing ideas. The wolf, portrayed as a minority in this story, underscores marginalized voices. His assertion that he is not to be blamed challenges the established narrative, mirroring the media's representation of marginalized groups, often reinforcing the status quo and dominant narrative.

Learners may alternatively write a *Perspective Journal* (Kuo, 2014) about a personal experience with multiple perspectives, describing the people involved, and determining whether any voices had been silenced. For example, one might conclude that this story necessitates the consideration of the motivation and perspectives of others before making judgments. Accordingly, learners write about their experiences, identifying the power imbalances and inequalities that contribute to issues. They also discuss how to solve it by taking action. Reflecting on underlying causes, effects, and potential solutions of their experience enhances their development of critical literacy to see things through a critical multicultural lens. It also helps them critically investigate real-life experiences and expand their critical responses and attention to their surroundings, leading them to think about solutions to problems.

Informed by Lewison et al.'s (2002) four-dimensional framework, this story from the wolf's perspective prompts learners to disrupt commonplace assumptions by questioning the traditional roles of pigs as victims and the wolf as the villain, encouraging them to rethink whose perspectives prevail and whose voices remain silenced. By interrogating multiple viewpoints, learners compare the fractured tale with the original, analyzing how different perspectives shape the storyline and reveal subjectivity in storytelling. The story also focuses on socio-political issues by highlighting media bias and power imbalances, mirroring how marginalized groups are often misrepresented and whose interests are prioritized. Finally, by engaging with these critical ideas, learners are encouraged to take action and promote social justice, developing empathy and understanding for marginalized voices and fostering a commitment to equity and diversity within their broader community.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Incorporating critical multicultural education into language courses proves vital in nurturing empathy, cultural understanding, and effective communication among learners from diverse backgrounds. Critical literacy equips learners with tools to navigate complex texts and deconstruct prevailing narratives and can be effectively taught through picturebooks as multimodal media. These books engage learners in nuanced analysis, unravel hidden narratives, and develop analytical skills by promoting the examination of visual imagery beyond the written word. Guided by Lewison et al.'s (2002) critical literacy framework, this study used picturebooks to encourage learners to question normative portrayals, consider diverse perspectives, examine societal power relations, and connect classroom analysis with broader social issues. For example, learners re-evaluated character portrayals from multiple viewpoints, prompting discussions on fairness, justice, and the socio-political implications of these representations. By aligning with critical multiculturalism, this approach facilitated deeper engagement with the material and empowered learners to connect text analysis with real-world issues.

This study has certain limitations, primarily caters to intermediate-level and above Japanese learners; future research should explore critical literacy practices suitable for learners at all proficiency levels. Adapting these practices to diverse language and cultural contexts would broaden the applicability and impact of critical literacy. For instance, encouraging learners to create picturebooks addressing real-world issues fosters critical thinking and active participation in discourse while nurturing creative expression. Additionally, comparing narratives across languages allows learners to gain insights into cultural nuances, language choices, and contextual story shaping, promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity. An additional list of carefully selected books covering diverse topics suitable for critical literacy development is provided in the Appendix, which future studies and practitioners are encouraged to explore.

While this study used a traditional hard-copy format for detailed analysis, leveraging interactive digital picturebooks with multimedia elements can enhance learner engagement and support digital literacy skills, enriching the learning experience and preparing learners for the demands of the digital age.

In future research, it is important to acknowledge that regional differences, cultural beliefs, political contexts, and ideological environments may affect this learning model's effectiveness. For instance, a Brazilian learner studying Japanese in South America may encounter different challenges than one in South Korea, while a Japanese learner in an Islamic region may have unique considerations compared to one in Scandinavia. Future studies might examine how these diverse realities shape learning outcomes and consider adapting the del to better accommodate learners' varied contexts.

Integrating critical multiculturalism, critical literacy, and picturebooks in language courses empowers learners as interpreters of language, narrative, and culture. Educators hold the key to shaping learners into skilled critical thinkers and empathetic communicators, fostering understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries in a globally interconnected world.

Policy Implications

In the context of higher education language programs, the integration of critical multiculturalism and critical literacy through picturebooks presents a powerful strategy to promote empathy, cultural understanding, and effective communication among diverse groups of learners. By incorporating literature that reflects a wide array of cultural narratives and global issues, this approach helps students engage with and appreciate different perspectives. These objectives align with micro-level policies focused on enhancing classroom practices, as well as meso-level policies that shape institutional frameworks aimed at fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments. At the macro-level, such initiatives contribute to national and international educational reforms designed to prepare learners for the responsibilities of global citizenship. The integration of critical multiculturalism and literacy not only enables students to engage with cultural diversity but also encourages them to develop critical thinking skills and intercultural competencies. Together, these policies create educational frameworks that respond to cultural diversity while nurturing a comprehensive understanding of global interconnectedness, ultimately preparing students to participate in a complex, multicultural world.

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Appendix: Selected picturebooks for Japanese language courses

This section provides a list of picturebooks written or translated into Japanese with social issues as either explicit or implicit themes. The section is further divided into subsections, such as changing viewpoints, minorities in Japan, gender identity and family forms, and disabilities, to comprehensively cover the wide breadth of social issues that exist.

Changing Viewpoints

1. Trivizas, E. (1994). *さんびきのかわいいおおかみ* [The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig] (T. Kodama, Trans.). Fuzambo. (Original work published 1993)

This book offers learners a fresh perspective on *The Three Little Pigs*, presenting an alternative transformation of the classic tale with humorous illustrations and an inverted message. A comparison with Scieszka's (1989) version allows for the exploration of differing viewpoints and challenges the common prejudice that wolves are always villains.

2. Sasaki, M. (1973). *やっぱりおおかみ* [Still a Wolf] . Fukuonkan shoten.
3. Seki, Y. (2016). *オオカミがキケンってほんとうですか?* [Are wolves really dangerous]. Japan: PHP Institute Office Int'l, Inc.

These two books also give different standpoints of the wolf. Everyone is and must be living their lives after all; what would they do if they were in the wolf's position?

4. Kuge, Y. (2017). *桃太郎が語る桃太郎* [Momotarō Narrates Momotarō]. Kōryōsha.

This story offers a unique perspective on the traditional Japanese folktale, Momotarō, presenting the story from Momotarō's viewpoint. By addressing long-debated aspects of the tale, such as Momotarō's motivations for conquering the ogres, the book prompts readers to ponder themes of power dynamics and justice. Ultimately, the book encourages critical thinking about alternative paths to achieving lasting happiness for all involved.

5. McKee, D. (2005). *せかいでいちばんつよい国* [The Conquerors] (C. Nakagawa, Trans.). Mitsumura tosho.

This tale revolves around a powerful general from a large country who habitually attacks others, believing his nation's way of life to be superior. Despite conquering numerous countries, the last one, remarkably defenseless, stands defiant. However, upon attempting invasion, an unexpected turn of events occurs. The story's irony, particularly the general's unforeseen happiness, prompts thought-provoking discussions on power dynamics, the pursuit of global dominance, and the true essence of strength.

6. Tashima, S. (1993). *やまからにこげてきた・ゴミをぽいぽい* [Escaped from the Mountain・Trash Goes Poipoi]. Dōshinsha.

With the two titles and the dual construction of the book, this story examines environmental issues from two perspectives. Each narrative starts on the opposite side of the book and converges in the middle, symbolizing a deeper layer of meaning that offers learners opportunities for diverse interpretations. The distinctive format of this book can be used to address various social issues by presenting them from two different sides.

Minorities in Community

7. Hinode no Ehon Seisaku Jikkō Īnka. (2002). *おたまさんのおかいさん* [Ms. Otama's Porridge]. Kaiho Publishing.

This story depicts life in a small village during World War II, where residents share all aspects of their impoverished daily lives, including meals and disputes, yet find happiness. The book's postscript discusses wartime living conditions and highlights the Buraku Liberation League's activism for free compulsory education, which led to the provision of free school textbooks nationwide from 1965 onwards (Kuraishi, 2011).

8. Wakaichi no Ehon Seisaku Jikkō Īnkai & Nagano. H., (2008). *ひらがなはなごつき* [Hiragana Diary]. Tokyo: Kaihō Publishing.

Yoshida's life was shaped by poverty and discrimination, denying her the chance to attend school and learn to read or write. At the age of 60, however, she embarks on a transformative journey to conquer the world of letters. Her story serves as a poignant reminder that literacy is not merely a skill but a gateway to empowerment and inclusion. It challenges readers to consider the disparities in access to education and opportunities, encouraging empathy and advocacy for equitable access to literacy for all.

9. Himeyuri Heiwa Kinen Shiryōkan. (2011). *絵本ひめゆり* [Picture Book Himeyuri]. Forest.

This picture book explores the World War II history of Okinawa, centering on the experiences of the Himeyuri student nurses. Through vivid illustrations, it depicts the stark realities faced by Okinawans during the war, from peaceful school life to forced mobilization by the Japanese army, working in cave hospitals, and fleeing from the violence of battle.

10. Maruki, T., & Maruki, I. (2014). *おきなわ島のこえ* [The Voices of Okinawa Island]. Komine.

This story portrays the harsh realities of survival during wartime, focusing on a girl and her younger brother whose lives are disrupted by the arrival of U.S. forces in Okinawa. Despite Okinawa's current beauty, the narrative emphasizes that the scars of war remain indelible, serving as a reminder of the island's enduring legacy.

11. Akiyama, T. (1999). *あしなが* [Long Legs]. Kodansha.

This story serves as a cautionary tale about the perils of prejudice fueled by misinformation, as it follows a community's reaction to a mysterious new member surrounded by rumors. It highlights the dangers of relying on secondhand information, particularly from the media. Through this narrative, learners are prompted to reflect on their own experiences and contemplate the nature of justice in similar situations.

12. Woodson, J. (2010). *むこうかぜのあそこ* [The Other Side]. (Y. Sakuma, Trans.). Mitsumura tosho. (Original work published 2001)

Through the symbolic presence of the fence, the book invites discussions on systemic power dynamics, whose narratives are highlighted or omitted, and the perspectives conveyed by the authors to their intended audience. It challenges common perceptions of immigrants and prompts reflection on the metaphorical implications of fences beyond divided communities. Learners are encouraged to identify personal barriers and biases, fostering deeper self-awareness and empathy. By acknowledging their membership in various minority groups and recognizing shared community issues, learners gain a broader perspective on societal dynamics.

Gender Identity and Family Forms

13. Polacco, P., & Polacco, P. (2018). *ふたりママの家で* [In Our Mothers' House] (A. Nakagawa, Trans.). Thousands of Books, Inc. (Original work published 2009)

This story portrays a loving family with two mothers, highlighting the innocence of children in accepting diversity. The illustrations, particularly the reactions of one of the neighbors' two sons to their mother's intolerance explore how prejudices develop as individuals mature, prompting fear of the unknown. Exploring avenues for understanding and acceptance can help mitigate these fears.

14. Haan, L., & Nijland, S. (2015). *王さまと王さま* [King & King] (A. Germer & Y. Mano, Trans.). Pot Publishing. (Original work published 2000)

This contemporary twist on traditional fairytales follows a prince's reluctant search for a spouse, as instructed by the old queen. Originating from the Netherlands, the first country to legalize same-sex marriages in 2001 (Waldijk, 2002), the story presents a vibrant atmosphere through joyful illustrations. Simultaneously, it challenges normative ethical values regarding the heteronormativity of marriage. Through this narrative, readers are invited to explore and discuss societal norms and ethical values.

15. Parnell, P., & Richardson, J. (2008). *タンタンタンゴは♡ふたり* [And Tango Makes Three] (K. Otsuji & K. Maeda, Trans.). Pot Publishing. (Original work published 2005)

With its warm and peaceful atmosphere, this story about two male penguins who form a bond and raise a chick together prompts learners to contemplate the meaning of family. Comparing the original English title with the Japanese version can spark discussions about cultural perspectives on same-sex couples.

This book facilitates conversations about marriage and gender issues in Japan, including same-sex marriage, adoption, surname usage, and gender equality.

16. Hence, N. (2010). *ピンクがすきってきめな* いで[Marre Du Rose]. (A. Toki, Trans.). Kodansha.

A girl who likes dinosaurs and trucks questions why it matters whether one is a boy or a girl to like something. As a translated picturebook from the French original, this book allows learners to discuss gender stereotypes and other stereotypes that the Japanese language holds and how the stereotypes are portrayed in society. Learners may discuss the history, background, and prospects of gender gap issues that exist in Japan as well as how the culturally particular expressions and phrases affect society.

17. Tanikawa, S. (1981). *わたし*[Me]. Fukuonkan.

Watashi encourages learners to reflect on their identity and how they are perceived by others, and the significance it holds for themselves. While individuals often consider how others view them and strive to present a certain image, the book teaches that perception varies among individuals. Recognizing the multitude of ways people can be seen and see others can lead to a newfound understanding, potentially transforming each day's experiences.

18. Hall, M. (2017). *レッド あかくてあかいウレヨンのほなし*[Red: A Crayon's Story] (S. Ueda, Trans.). Kodomo no miraisha. (Original work published 2015)

This book explores the impact of labeling on biases and perceptions. When a blue crayon labeled as red struggles with coloring, others attempt to help, but to no avail. It isn't until a new friend offers a fresh perspective that the crayon finds acceptance. The book encourages learners to embrace their true selves and challenges the tendency to judge based on labels.

Disabilities

19. Tabata, S. (1985). *さっちゃんのまほうの手*[Sachiko's Magical Hand].Kaisēsyā.

This is the story of a girl born with a congenital deformity on one hand. Initially unconcerned about her condition, she becomes self-conscious after a classmate points it out during a confrontation. This book depicts her life experiences, dreams, successes, and failures, mirroring those of individuals without disabilities. It highlights how able-bodied individuals may inadvertently impose limitations on those with disabilities due to inherent power dynamics. Sachiko's classmates' innocent remark triggers a stereotype threat, potentially affecting her performance. Discussing these stereotypes and threats allows learners to understand individuals beyond their group identity, fostering inclusivity and empathy.

20. Nakayama, C., & Wada, M. (2005). *どんなかんじかなあ*[I Wonder What It's Like]. Jiyū Kokuminsya.

This book offers insights into the perspectives and capabilities of differently-abled individuals. Through the story of Hiro, who explores the experiences of his friends with disabilities by temporarily impairing his senses, readers are prompted to reconsider their advantages and strengths in relation to perceived special needs. It encourages discussions on preconceptions, biases, and societal change, fostering awareness of the varied perceptions individuals hold towards different groups.

21. Yoshitake, S. (2018). *みえるとかみえないと*[Visible and Invisible]. Alice kan.

With its unique illustrations, this story prompts readers to reconsider the concept of normalcy. A boy embarks on a journey to various planets, encountering beings with vastly different characteristics from those on his own planet. Initially feeling uncomfortable as a minority on each planet, he eventually finds solace in the realization that there is always someone slightly different from others on every planet. Through these encounters, he discovers the value of embracing differences and the unique abilities they bring. Alongside the boy, learners can explore questions such as: What does it mean to be the same or different? Additionally, learners can reflect on their differences and the special abilities they possess.