

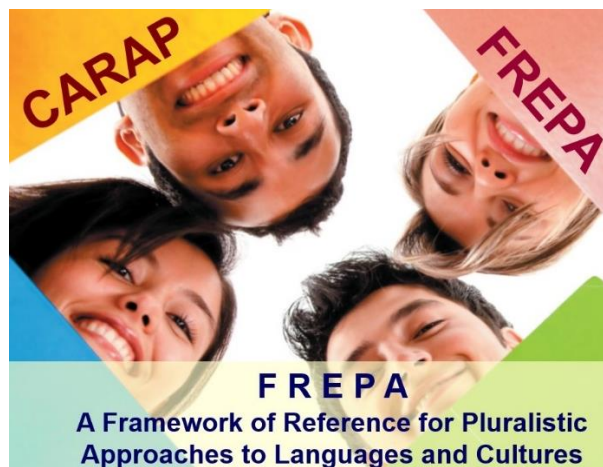
# **ALTs as Cultural Instructors: Introducing FREPA as a Roadmap to Teaching about Culture**

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ALTs are not just language teachers. You are also *cultural informants* – a role clearly given importance not only by the JET Programme, whose homepage states that “[it aims to promote internationalization in Japan’s local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange](#),” but also MEXT itself, which references the importance of learning about culture in all levels of the Courses of Study, and also in the commentaries to foreign language subjects.

ALTs have a dual role; both language teacher/linguistic expert and cultural informant (how much each role is valued by each BOE, school, or teacher varies of course!). Most ALTs are not formally trained in teaching either of these things – there are of course, exceptions, but I certainly wasn’t when I was an ALT, even with a background in linguistics. So many of us start out flying by the seats of our pants, learning as we go. Thankfully, there is a wealth of useful material for us out there, although unfortunately, it can be difficult to figure out how everything fits into the ‘big picture’ of language teaching and learning.

As for language teaching, learning, and evaluation, one epoch-defining resource that continues to exert its influence today is the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (CEFR: Council of Europe, 2001). The descriptors that the CEFR introduced were revolutionary in their ability to provide a roadmap for language teachers and learners, a localized understanding of where we (or our students) are in the language learning process, and where to head next. Its impact has been felt in Japan, too, with many BOEs implementing CEFR-esque Can-do lists as part of their evaluation process.

But what about when it comes to culture? Many ALTs will certainly be used to giving self-introductions and talking about their home life and culture, and this is an important part of the ALT role. Yet as time goes by, and this routine starts to become a little stale, many ALTs find themselves confounded with how to approach teaching about culture in a way that is student-centered and meaningful, and that doesn’t rely on simply relaying information to students, or require us to be the “dancing monkey,” simply putting on a superficial displays of ‘foreign culture.’



Thankfully, there is a resource that can help to ground cultural instruction in a similar way that CEFR did for language learning: [\*The Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures, FREPA\*](#) (2012). Also developed by the Council of Europe, FREPA is based upon the notions of plurilingual and pluricultural competence (for interested readers, there is more information below), the framework lists a number of [\*key competences\*](#), as well as descriptors similar to those of the CEFR for [\*knowledge\*](#), [\*attitudes\*](#), and [\*skills\*](#) related to both language and culture.

Competences which activate knowledge, skills and attitudes through reflection and action - valid for all languages and cultures; - concerning the relationships between languages and between cultures.					
<b>C1</b> Competence in managing linguistic and cultural communication in a context of otherness		<b>C2</b> Competence in the construction and broadening of a plural linguistic and cultural repertoire		<b>C3</b> Competence of decentring	
<b>C1.1</b> Competence in resolving conflicts, overcoming obstacles, clarifying misunderstandings	<b>C1.2</b> Competence in negotiation	<b>C2.1</b> Competence in profiting from one's own inter-cultural / inter-language experiences	<b>C2.2</b> Competence in applying more systematic and controlled learning approaches in a context of otherness	<b>C4</b> Competence in making sense of unfamiliar linguistic and/or cultural features	
<b>C1.3</b> Competence in mediation		<b>C1.4</b> Competence of adaptability		<b>C5</b> Competence of distancing	
				<b>C6</b> Competence of critical analysis of the (communicative and/or learning) situation and activities one is involved in	
				<b>C7</b> Competence in recognising the "other" and otherness	

FREPA differs from the CEFR in that its descriptors are not ranked – there is no A1 through C2 scale. Rather, it breaks down certain knowledge, attitudes, and skills into sets and subsets that are easily accessible. For instance, under the skill *can compare communicative cultures* (S3.9), is the sub-skill, *can compare one's own non-verbal communication practices with those of others* (S3.9.2.2). Another instance under attitudes (paraphrased) could be *the disposition to suspend one's judgement*, of which a subcategory is *the will to combat/desconstruct/overcome one's prejudices towards other languages/cultures and their speakers/members* (A11.3). In a similar

way to the evocative power of the CEFR descriptors and can-does, the FREPA descriptors lend themselves to the development of tasks that can help to foster these competencies.

Some of the work for the teachers has already been done, too – the FREPA website has a repository of teaching materials that are freely available to use and linked to the descriptors. Many will of course have to be adapted for use in the Japanese classroom, but they certainly provide a useful (and quite often fun) starting point.



Of course, just as reading the CEFR descriptors does not automatically lead to becoming a fantastic language teacher, perusing the FREPA descriptors will not make us brilliant teachers of culture. It might just, however, help us to ground our cultural lessons, and to make them meaningful for our students. The approaches described in FREPA are also wholistic – they encourage reflection on learners' own languages and cultures, and can therefore help to foster a greater understanding in our students not only of foreign cultures, but also of their own. This certainly reflects the idea of promoting international exchange. [Give it a look!](#)

For interested readers:

The FREPA is in part inspired by the concepts of *Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence* ([Coste, Moore & Zarate: 2009\[1997\]](#)), concepts that have been extremely influential in the last 20 years of language teaching research (see also [Moore, Lau & Van Viegen, 2020](#)). Similarly, the framework encourages pluralistic activities, some of which are gaining traction in Japan – for an example, see [Oyama & Pearce, 2019](#): freely available online from November, 2020). Finally, keep your eyes open for my latest piece on ALTs - *Homogenous Representations, Diverse Realities: Assistant Language Teachers at Elementary Schools* to be published in JALT's [The Language Teacher](#) sometime in 2021).

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