

# Visual Literacy of Traditional Play (*Dentou Tekina Asobi*) To Stimulate Cross-Cultural Understanding in The *Dokkai* Course

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## Abstract

*This study aims to explain how visual literacy using digital photos supports students' reading comprehension and cross-cultural understanding in a dokkai (reading) course. Visual literacy in this study was implemented through digital photos and texts with a focus on traditional Japanese and Indonesian games, which provided a meaningful cultural context for comparison. Digital photos were obtained from online sources and were used to help students observe traditional play (dentoteki na asobi) and connect vocabulary, textual meaning, and cultural elements. Visual literacy provided initial support for reading, stimulated prediction and interpretation, and encouraged critical thinking about cross-cultural phenomena. This research employed a qualitative descriptive method to examine how digital photos were used as a dokkai learning medium and how visual literacy supported students' exploration of cross-cultural understanding. The results showed that students were able to identify similarities and differences between traditional Japanese and Indonesian games, appreciated the cultural value of traditional play, and developed critical awareness of shifts between traditional and modern play culture.*

**Keywords:** *visual literacy; digital photos; traditional play; dokkai; cross-cultural*

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## 1. Introduction

In the digital age, the world today abounds with illustrations and visualizations. Visual literacy skills are essential for individuals to interpret, understand, use, and even produce visual tools that convey specific messages or meanings. Within the concept of visual literacy, “reading” refers to “reading the world through images.” The phenomenon of digitalization and mass media, particularly those related to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the internet, significantly fills contemporary life with visual messages (Supsakova, 2016). Reading literacy plays a crucial role in education, as it greatly contributes to the development

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of knowledge and skills. Gabowitsch and Topolska (2023) stated that visual literacy greatly supports pedagogical understanding, and further research addressing the pictorial turn is needed, as this shift highlights the growing power of images in shaping knowledge and learning processes. Visual literacy skills can be cultivated through various comprehensive approaches, allowing learners to practice interpreting texts, images, and visualizations from diverse perspectives and methods (Ozsoy, 2021). To ensure that reading literacy becomes more engaging and varied for learners, educators need to implement a range of instructional strategies. Visual-based education provides opportunities for learners to engage with the visual structures found in photos, emojis, gifs, stickers, posters, videos, magazines, television programs, and beyond (Ozsoy, 2021).

One interesting topic for digital visual-based learning materials is traditional games, in this case traditional games in the cross-cultural context of Japan and Indonesia. Japanese popular culture is of great interest to Japanese language learners, especially those studying at university level. They enjoy, use, and study various Japanese popular cultural products (Umoro, 2025). Knowledge of popular culture is certainly crucial, but students, as learners of Japanese language and culture, also need to have a good understanding of traditional Japanese culture. The efforts of Japanese language teachers to incorporate cultural materials into language learning with the aim of enriching cultural treasures and intercultural practices, in line with the Japanese government's efforts to maintain the image of Japanese culture throughout the world. Likewise in Indonesia, the Japanese government consistently introduces Japanese culture and arts to the Indonesian people to attract attention and build good friendships (Sri Hastuty & Ong, 2025).

Words or phrases, sentences, or discourses used in game play can be learned or practiced through interaction. Engagement in game-based learning encourages repeated language use and collaborative interaction, enabling students to enrich their knowledge of games and discuss related issues communicatively (Ningsih, 2023; Sadigzade, 2025). Traditional games, which are used as theoretical material in foreign language learning, particularly reading skills, have high educational and cultural value. Through texts discussing the rules, history, or symbolic meaning of traditional games, students can expand their vocabulary and understand discourse structures contextually. Furthermore, this learning fosters an appreciation for cultural values such as togetherness, honesty, and creativity reflected in these games. Thus, reading texts about traditional games not only trains linguistic skills but also enriches cultural insight and develops students' critical thinking skills.

This study focuses on the use of visual literacy in the form of digital photos. Digital photos are considered miniatures of sociocultural reality (Kusumaningrum & Widodo, 2017). The demand for high-quality images or photos is now much easier to meet in the digital era compared to the period when the internet was not yet widely accessible. Technology enables images and pictures that reflect various realities of human life to appear more vividly. The advancement of technology in integrating text and illustrations also challenges educators' creativity in managing diverse digital media as tools for delivering knowledge and facilitating learning activities in more engaging, efficient, and effective ways. Recent studies emphasize that language learning should not rely solely on written text but also integrate visual and multimodal resources to support meaning construction. Visual elements, such as digital photos, contribute to learners' understanding by enabling them to connect linguistic input with sensory

and experiential perspectives. Through visual literacy, learners actively interpret images as meaning-making resources that complement written language and support deeper comprehension (Gabowitsch & Topolska, 2023; Özsoy, 2021)

Digital photos can provide insights into cultural practices that are rarely encountered in contemporary life, such as traditional games. In the context of learning, the study by Komaini et al. (2024) demonstrated that integrating traditional games into the learning process can increase students' interest, thereby making the theme of traditional games a potential source of interactive language learning materials. The theme of traditional games is particularly engaging to explore in language learning. Materials on this theme can be quite extensive, as Japan's rich culture is also shaped by the wide variety of traditional games it encompasses. The development of the traditional games theme can be approached in different ways, such as examining cross-cultural connections between Japanese and Indonesian traditional games, or analyzing the cultural dynamics of shifting public interest from traditional games to modern ones. Permatasari (2023) previous studies have emphasized that effective language learning requires the integration of linguistic competence and cultural understanding, as learners need to comprehend cultural values, practices, and contexts in which the target language is used. Japanese traditional games not only filled children's daily playtime but were also often played on specific occasions, such as cultural festivals and seasonal events. For example, during the New Year celebration, there is a game similar to badminton called *hagoita*. In addition, in the past, Japanese children often played *umatake*, a bamboo horse game similar to the traditional Indonesian game known as *egrang*.

The names of traditional Japanese games can be challenging for foreign learners of Japanese to remember. However, learning about traditional Japanese games becomes less effective if learners are unable to memorize these names. Materials related to traditional Japanese games can also be better understood if the supporting vocabulary is introduced beforehand. Quiz activities that include the names of traditional games along with their cultural content are highly engaging, especially when supported by clear visualizations. Learning activities employing a case or problem based approach can utilize visualizations to stimulate learners' critical thinking about the issues being discussed. Japan and Indonesia are both geographically located in Asia, which creates strong potential for cultural similarities. Such cultural comparisons broaden learners' knowledge and understanding as members of societies that share an Eastern cultural heritage. In addition to geography, historical factors also play a significant role in shaping cultural integration between Japan and Indonesia.

In *dokkai* (reading) lectures, reading activities can be integrated with cross-cultural learning by engaging students in discussions or reflections on the essence of both cultures. Cross-cultural competence and reading skills are two crucial aspects of education. Cross-cultural competence is one of the essential skills that today's learners need to acquire. It is defined as respect for perspectives on culture, traditions, norms, and other related aspects (Chang et al., 2022). Recent studies conceptualize intercultural competence as a dynamic process that integrates knowledge, attitudes, and skills, enabling learners to reflect on cultural differences and negotiate meaning through language use in diverse contexts (Chang et al., 2022; Umoro, 2025).

Recent research has proposed frameworks of intercultural communicative competence that help learners develop the skills needed to explore cultural complexity, deepen their

understanding of cultural aspects in texts, and support critical reading. Studies indicate that integrating intercultural communication awareness in language learning helps learners reflect on cultural values and perspectives, enhancing their ability to interpret cultural meanings in written and oral discourse (Suci, 2023; Nurmaisyah, 2025). Core components of such competence include comparing and interpreting cultural practices, observing and analysing cultural phenomena, understanding how language and culture interact, and using language effectively to communicate across cultural contexts.

More recent studies have begun to explore the integration of visual media in language classrooms; however, these efforts generally focus on comprehension outcomes or motivation, without systematically incorporating a visual literacy framework that guides students in interpreting images critically. Moreover, there remains limited research on the use of digital photos specifically designed to support cultural interpretation in Japanese reading instruction, particularly in cross-cultural contexts such as Indonesia–Japan. The novelty of this study lies in the use of relevant digital photos alongside a visual literacy approach in Japanese reading (*dokkai*) instruction. Digital photos are utilized to help students predict word meanings and interpret phenomena related to traditional games, thereby deepening cross-cultural understanding between Japan and Indonesia. Prior to conducting the study, observations and interviews were carried out to strengthen the selection of appropriate instructional strategies for the problems identified. Initial observations indicated that students had difficulty maintaining focus when lessons began with lengthy texts. Furthermore, students were less active when reading instruction relied on lecture and direct translation methods. In contrast, students preferred the use of visual and audiovisual media to reinforce their prior knowledge before engaging with texts. Based on the interview results, students expressed greater interest in reading texts accompanied by images or visual aids. They stated that images supported interpretation, captured attention to stimulate reading activities, and that learning about culture was just as important as learning the language itself.

In this study, the use of digital photos of traditional games as visual literacy media is explored in the context of a Japanese reading course, highlighting the potential of visualization to enhance students' comprehension and engagement. The study examines how these visual materials can support language learning and foster cross-cultural understanding through the theme of traditional games. By integrating digital photos of traditional games into the learning process, the study contributes to the development of visual literacy and pedagogical strategies in Japanese language education. Based on the background and focus of this study, the following research questions are proposed to guide the investigation: "How does the use of digital photos of traditional games as visual literacy media affect students' comprehension and engagement in a Japanese reading course?" and "What classroom interactions and learning dynamics emerge from the participatory use of visual literacy in the reading process?"

## 2. Method

This study employed a participatory qualitative method (Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2017) to describe the learning procedures, phenomena, and analyze the dynamics that occurred in the learning process, implementing visual literacy with the theme of traditional games as *dokkai* material. The participatory qualitative method actively involved participants to understand experiences of reading through visual literacy and to support cross-cultural

understanding. In this research, the researcher also acted as the instructor who led the class. The researcher guided each activity, while students took part through group discussions, observed photos, and shared simple cross-cultural reflections. During these activities, the researcher followed their responses and noted how they interacted with the material. The research focused on how digital photos assisted students in tracing the codes that connected the meanings of vocabulary while serving as a medium for students to express their cross-cultural perceptions. The vocabulary comprehension activity in this study applied the bottom-up technique, in which students first understood vocabulary to support the reading process, while the cross-cultural activity was implemented through applied discussions that addressed issues related to the reading theme.

This study was conducted in the Dokkai 3 course during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year and involved 34 fifth-semester students of the Japanese Language Education Study Program at FKIP Universitas Riau. The study was conducted from April to May, beginning with the preparation of the research plan, followed by two instructional sessions for the Dokkai 3 course, each lasting 100 minutes. The learning activities applied a visual literacy approach using a series of curated digital photos related to traditional Japanese games, and concluded with the preparation of the research report. The data were examined using a qualitative thematic analysis. Observation records and student reflections were coded to identify recurring patterns related to the learning process, which were then organized into overarching themes. Analytical credibility was supported through source triangulation and reflective interpretation to ensure trustworthy findings.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings on how visual literacy, through digital photos of traditional games, enhances reading comprehension and fosters cross-cultural understanding. The images served as a guide for participants to explore vocabulary, interpret texts, and engage in discussions and activities, allowing them to connect and reflect on different cultural perspectives.

Figure 1 is used at the beginning of the class as a brainstorming tool. By viewing these photos, students spontaneously recall memories of games they used to play in the past. From a visual literacy perspective, students recognize that the issue being highlighted is that the games shown in the photos are now rarely encountered in everyday life.



Figure 1. Digital documentation of traditional games in Indonesia  
Source: <https://bekelsego.com>

Students are then allowed to briefly mention the names of the games and share their childhood experiences of playing them, or recall games that are still commonly found in rural areas. Afterward, students are encouraged to predict whether traditional games in Indonesia and Japan have similarities. This activity can be introduced with guiding questions such as 「子どもの頃、どんな遊びをしましたか」、「インドネシアの伝統的な遊びと似ている日本の伝統的な遊びがあると思いますか」.

The cross-cultural understanding that arises from the use of Figure 1 is that students recognize both Japan and Indonesia, which remain deeply rooted in Eastern cultural values, have long been built upon strong cultural foundations, including traditional folk games. The characteristics of children and youth in both countries, such as friendliness, solidarity, and willingness to help, have also been shaped by the habit of playing together. Although these traditions are gradually fading, Japanese and Indonesian societies continue to make efforts to preserve traditional games on various occasions.

Figure 2 presents digital photos of modern games. Through a visual literacy approach, these digital photos are used to help students recognize and understand the phenomenon of shifting interests among children in play activities. Students are asked to correlate these digital images with the ones shown previously, thereby stimulating their cognitive processes to explain both the phenomenon and the factors behind children abandoning traditional games in favor of modern forms of play, such as online games and activities at contemporary recreational venues. Students are then encouraged to express their opinions on the phenomenon of the cultural shift in children's play in Japan. The discussion can be initiated with questions such as 「最近の子供また若者はどんな遊びをする興味を持っていますか」、「以前と比べたら、外の遊び場は結構変わりましたか」

The cross-cultural understanding derived from the use of images 2 and 3 is reflected in several opinions expressed by students. Similar to trends observed worldwide, both Japan and Indonesia have experienced a shift in children's play preferences from traditional games to digital ones, influenced by rapid technological advancement as well as reduced parental supervision due to working parents.



Figure 2. *Online game*  
Source: <https://www.merahputih.com/>



Figure 3. *Playground*  
Source: <https://radarcirebon.id/>

Modern gaming centers have increasingly expanded, driven by economic growth, the decline of outdoor play spaces, and safety considerations. These phenomena can be observed in both Japan and Indonesia.

The digital photos shown in figure 4 were designed by the lecturer as quiz material to help students learn the names of traditional Japanese games. Through a visual literacy-based learning approach, students were asked to observe the images and identify clues about activities or objects to guess the correct vocabulary. For instance, students initially did not know the name of the game *daruma otoshi*, but after seeing the photo of the *daruma* doll and the striking tool, they were able to select the correct game name. Likewise, in another example, students initially did not know the meaning of the word *nawa*, but upon seeing the jumping activity depicted in the photo, they associated it with the word *tobi*. As a result, the students were able to identify that the Japanese term for jump rope is *nawa tobi*.

After completing this quiz, students are encouraged to make connections with traditional Indonesian games that resemble those shown in figure 4. They are asked to share their impressions and opinions about the similarities between traditional Japanese and Indonesian games.



Figure 4. Digital photos of traditional Japanese games.  
 (Photo sources are provided in the reference list)

「日本とインドネシアの伝統的な遊びの類似点と相違点は何でしょうか」、「それに関して、どんな感想を持っていますか」. Through the use of Figure 4, students expressed great enthusiasm upon discovering that many traditional Japanese games are similar to those played in Indonesia.

Figures 5, 6, and 7 are used to introduce the theme of the reading text (*dokkai*), which focuses on New Year celebrations in Japan, known as *O-shougatsu* (お正月). The digital photos in Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the practice of *shodou*, or Japanese calligraphy, which is often featured in various cultural events. Through visual literacy learning, students observe and discuss the differences in how *shodou* is performed in these two images.

To enhance students' understanding of the cultural aspect shown in Figure 6, the instructor presents a video as part of a visualization strategy, showcasing the modern trend of *shodou* as a performance that integrates writing movements, dance, and music, resulting in a large and beautiful piece of Japanese calligraphy. The instructor then prompts students to recall one of the traditional activities of the Japanese New Year, namely *kakizome* (書初め), the practice of writing the first calligraphy of the year.

Figure 7 is a vocabulary quiz focusing on traditional games played during *O-shougatsu* (お正月). It contains digital photos that illustrate the activities and the tools used in the games, enabling students to predict the appropriate verb for the given nouns. For example, students can understand that the word *tako* (たこ) means "kite" through the image, then by observing the activity in the photo, lifting and flying the kite they can identify the correct verb choice, which is *ageru* (あげる).

The quiz in Figure 7 is adapted from the book 「季節で学ぶ日本語」 *Japanese Through the Seasons*, published in the ALC Press Japanese Textbook Series. The illustrations in the book have been replaced with digital photos from various sources on the internet.



Figure 5. Practice calligraphy during a modern event

Source: [casy.co.jp/](https://casy.co.jp/)



Figure 6. Practice calligraphy during a traditional event.

Source: <https://syodou-p.jp/>

The reading text as the main material, is also taken from the same book, titled 新春 (*shinshun*), which has the same meaning as *o-shougatsu*, namely “New Year.” By learning vocabulary related to games played during *o-shougatsu*, students acquire specific knowledge about Japanese children’s activities during the celebration before reading the entire text. The learning activity then proceeds with a cross-cultural component. Students are asked to revisit the visuals in the vocabulary quiz in figure 7 to compare them to traditional games in Indonesia.

The cross-cultural understanding gained through activities conducted before and after reading the text about *O-shougatsu* covers several aspects. Students developed a deeper understanding of Japanese culture during the New Year celebrations, particularly in terms of traditional games. They also expressed admiration for the New Year celebration in Japan, which is considered one of the most important events in the country. In addition, students compared these traditions with major holidays in Indonesia, which are generally rooted in religious factors. Furthermore, they recognized how the passage of time influences modifications in art and cultural expressions. Cross-cultural discussions, enriched by visual literacy, added further meaning and deepened the learning experience in reading comprehension.

These results are in line with studies on game-based learning, which indicate that interactive and visually supported learning activities encourage learners to engage more actively with cultural content and facilitate meaningful language practice (Ningsih, 2023; Sadigzade, 2025). A similar pattern also appeared in the study of Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018), where digital images supported students in connecting learning materials with their own cultural experiences. The findings of this study support these earlier works and extend them by demonstrating that traditional games can serve as an effective bridge for helping students compare Japanese and Indonesian cultures while improving their reading comprehension.



Figure 7. Vocabulary quiz on traditional games during *O-shougatsu* (お正月).  
(Photo sources are provided in the reference list)

These findings are also in line with several other studies discussing strategies in reading learning. In an extensive reading study, Shimono (2023) explains that learners can develop reading fluency and comprehension more independently through sustained exposure to texts that allow meaning to be constructed gradually over time. This gradual meaning-building process is conceptually similar to how students in this study interpret visual materials such as photos. Additionally, Maulia (2019) demonstrates that small group discussions facilitate students' negotiation of textual meaning through interaction. This interactional process can also create opportunities for cross-cultural engagement during learning activities, particularly when authentic materials are used. Meanwhile, Manuhutu (2025) found that retelling the content of a reading can clarify the core understanding of the text, and these results are in line with how students connect reading information with their own cultural experiences through visuals. Compared to these studies, this study provides an additional contribution by showing that the use of photos combined with traditional game themes can be an effective bridge to deepen understanding of *dokkai* while helping students build cross-cultural relationships more naturally.

The table presents the average scores of students' cross-cultural understanding through visual literacy activities using digital photos of traditional games. Students achieved the highest scores in vocabulary comprehension (4.2) and individual reflection (4.1), indicating that visual materials effectively supported learning new terms and personal cultural insights. Cultural interpretation (4.0) and participation in discussions (3.9) also showed strong engagement, while reading comprehension (3.8) was slightly lower, suggesting the need for additional guidance in connecting textual information with visual and cultural cues. Overall, the results demonstrate that using traditional game images in reading activities can enhance both language skills and cross-cultural awareness.

Table 1. Students' Cross-Cultural Understanding Through Visual Literacy Activities

(Likert Scale 1–5)

Cross-Cultural Understanding Indicators	Average Student Score
Vocabulary Comprehension	4.2
Reading Comprehension	3.8
Cultural Interpretation	4.0
Cross-Cultural Discussion Participation	3.9
Individual Reflection	4.1

#### 4. Conclusion

Visual literacy plays a significant role in the learning process by enhancing learners' perception and intuition, which makes them more responsive in interpreting and deeply understanding messages conveyed through illustrations. The use of visual literacy encourages learning activities that are more interactive, exploratory, and collaborative. In addition, visual literacy supports the development of critical thinking skills and shows potential in addressing students' declining interest in reading.

Digital photos contribute to learners' understanding by linking images with ideas and written language, allowing them to interpret visual elements as meaningful representations that support text comprehension. Through visual cues, learners are able to grasp meanings more effectively and connect visual information with written content. Digital photos also help establish contextual understanding, especially for situations that cannot be directly experienced. By observing visual details, perspectives, and cultural elements presented in photos, learners gain opportunities for deeper analysis and more focused interpretation of meaning.

In this study, digital photos were implemented as part of a visual literacy-based learning strategy that focused on traditional Japanese and Indonesian games. This thematic approach enabled students to relate new information to familiar contexts, which supported vocabulary comprehension, identification of cultural symbols, and connections to reading texts. Consistent with the participatory qualitative approach adopted in this research, learning activities involved direct interaction between the instructor and students. This interaction allowed students to observe, compare, and reflect on cultural elements in a guided yet natural manner. The findings indicate that when visual literacy skills are underdeveloped, learners experience difficulties in interpreting the roles of images and engaging critically with visual materials. Conversely, strengthening visual literacy enables learners to interact more meaningfully with educational visuals and construct understanding that goes beyond written text. Overall, the study demonstrates that integrating visual literacy with culturally relevant themes and participatory classroom activities can effectively support students' reading comprehension while also enhancing cross-cultural understanding in the dokkai learning context.

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