

Around the world with subtitles

How fiction really taught me something about cultures

The word "internationalization" often brings to mind (long-distance) air travel, unfamiliar foods, and the initial discomfort of trying to communicate with people whose native language you don't quite master. Or, regardless of your personal preferences, tropical climates and cocktails on the beach with new friends. Anything that's outside your comfort zone. Literally.

Although I'm eager to get to know other people, customs, and cultures, my comfort zone isn't as large as I'd like. Unfortunately, our family never travels, so planning such an adventure on my own would be a step too far, and I'd walk straight into the fear zone instead of the growth zone. Since I'd love to work as a teacher at an international school and broaden my horizons, I thought it would be a fun challenge to start my internationalization journey from the same place I'm writing now: behind my computer.

With this report, I want to demonstrate how I've developed international competencies through media and conscious self-study and reflection—despite not having traveled physically.

How it all started... the beginning of a childlike obsession.

During this course, one of my classmates asked me when my interest in other cultures began. My answer turned out to be incorrect, as I realize now, as I write this paper. The very first moment I can remember realizing there was a world beyond our own occurred much earlier than I realized. When I was young, I had intense obsessions with specific countries, as only young children can, and these obsessions still form a layer of my identity. My grandmother went on a trip to Egypt—and as a seven-year-old, I absorbed everything I could find about Egypt. I had a folder filled with newspaper clippings about mummies and discoveries; you could ask me anything about the mythology, and I would talk about it for hours, even if you weren't listening. After I saw the film "*The Amazing Panda Adventure (1995)*"—which was still on videocassette back then—I was obsessed with China and pandas, and I was thrilled when I received not only a panda plush toy for Sinterklaas, but also real bamboo stalks. It felt like I could touch China. I don't think a child has ever been so happy with some foliage. (And still... This summer I made myself a mosquito net above my bed from bamboo stalks I cut down myself!) I still remember the movie "*A Little Princess (1995)*", in which the main character told about India and the mythological story of *Rama. And Sita* and I were completely lost in a world of mysterious forests and elephants. I was a dreamer, and I dreamed along with the films, my soul carried away to all the places I hadn't yet known.

My obsession with other cultures subsided briefly and resurfaced the summer before moving on to college. A Japanese song (band: Radwimps) had somehow wormed its way onto my playlist. The first time I heard it, something clicked in my head, and even though I didn't understand the language, I felt like I could feel it in my body. I still remember the hair on the back of my neck standing up and my heart pounding like crazy. I couldn't get it out of my head; I remember writing out the lyrics entirely by hand in "*romaji*," hoping to learn them and somehow "capture" them. I still find that Japanese songs can evoke a powerful response, which I don't get with other music.

Not long after, I watched my first Japanese series. And then a Chinese one, but I didn't know that yet. It sounded completely different, but the characters looked the same, and that was quite confusing. It was only afterward that I understood the nuances between the two language systems. A Korean series followed that same year. At the end of my first year of college, I started studying Japanese through YouTube videos, which I still do occasionally. And more series from other countries followed.

Towards the end of my bachelor's degree, I had the opportunity to work in the school lab for my internship. Most of the students there were international students. I wanted to help them and connect with them, but I had to suppress the urge to ask too many questions, for fear of distracting them during their experiments. Sometimes I couldn't resist: *What did they think of Belgium? Was it very different from their own country? In what ways?* This international experience—although not as impressive as that of the international students themselves—made me realize that I wanted to work in an international setting. I had long since realized that working in a lab wasn't for me and that I much preferred to be a teacher. It was around that time that I happened upon the website of an international school, something I hadn't previously known existed. When I saw how proudly they presented on their website the number of different nationalities at the school, how they celebrated each other's holidays, and shared dishes, I felt a little joy. I was genuinely touched: here their cultural differences were not a reason for discrimination, but rather an additional reason to connect and a way to learn from each other.

In other words, my childhood fascinations have grown over the years into a conscious interest in cultural diversity, which has helped shape my career choices.

Although I've taken international online courses (*Europe101 Liquid Leadership course* and *EduLAW Europe*), I'd like to focus on what I've learned from self-studying Japanese and watching international series and films in their original languages, consciously considering the cultural aspects, as this is where my heart lies. And, as funny as it may be—since these are equally enjoyable activities—I've also learned the most from this.

Watching international series

I love watching international series and have visited at least 19 different countries (Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Germany, France, Netherlands, Russia, Japan, Philippines, India, Taiwan, Turkey, Thailand, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, United States, South Korea, Italy).

I'd love to "visit" as many countries as possible. (That quest is a fun challenge in itself, even if you don't subscribe to streaming services.) If staying in a country is a cultural immersion, then watching movies and series is a flashy cultural car wash, often with a manual called "subtitles." You can gain so many new impressions in a short time, especially if you watch in the original language and consciously engage with it. You do have to take the time to look things up online and read up on what you see and notice. Getting lost in articles about something you saw makes it just as much more enjoyable, and that's also difficult to do when you're on exchange there.

More intimate perspectives

Series give you the chance to visit places you would never see as a traveler or during a standard exchange. You'll see very intimate scenes at the family table or between lovers. An example is an impatient Filipino father who brings his forehead to his son's hand instead of waiting for him to take it (*mano* (greeting)). You see the characters take on different roles: who are they as a friend and who as a brother? How do they behave as a lover and how as a mortal enemy? Each of these roles incorporates a piece of their culture, as expectations, norms, and values are linked to each role.

Contrasts, values, and politeness

You get the chance to peek inside the various levels of society—the very poorest and the very richest—in a single sitting. Personally, I really like the kind of series that depict contrasts, such as poorer residents in mountain villages or suburbs and a wealthy businessman in the capital. Because the scenes follow each other so quickly and you can watch one series after the other, it's easier to see contrasts and perceive the bigger picture, both within a particular (sub)culture in a specific country and between multiple countries. For example, Asian countries like China and Japan are very hierarchical and place great importance on politeness within society. These are things you find reflected in their way of speaking, their multiple forms of politeness in Japan, and the fact that in the business world, people address each other only by their last names, even if they've known each other for a long time. In the Philippines, they're a bit more relaxed, but there's still a lot of politeness towards their older relatives, and they greet them with a traditional *mano* . They'll address strangers with phrases peppered with " *po* ," but they seem to switch to casual speech much more readily. This politeness and differentiation is much less pronounced in more European countries like Germany or France. Although I'm from Belgium, I find that I would feel at home in the Filipino context and appreciate the strong politeness in Asian countries, but it might be a bit too strong for everyday use.

Historical perspective

Series also offer the opportunity to travel not only through space, but also through time: the time when Japan occupied Korea and how the Koreans resisted it, ancient China, Canada during World War II... This provides deeper insight into certain aspects, for example, the Japanese-Chinese-Korean occupations and the exchange and the development of their writing systems. Their lifestyles at the time, their political systems, their traditional dress... This way, you not only get to know the current culture but you dig into its roots. I absolutely love this. The more you "jump" through time and space, the more you see how everything is interwoven here and you understand why things are the way they are today. Nothing in a culture is "just like that." By looking deeper, you understand things. And when you understand things, things that seemed strange at first become perfectly logical. I think that helps you adapt and develop an understanding of a culture. For example: if they told me in South America to put my toilet paper in the trash instead of the toilet, I'd find that odd. Only when they explained that it's because the drains that were installed earlier weren't designed for it would I understand.

Subtitles...ensure understanding

Subtitles are magical, especially when the translator has made a real effort and, for example, provides a brief explanation of puns and typical expressions, allowing you to experience a bit of their language. In a regular live exchange, you'd miss this deeper layer.

Subtitles have taught me to be less suspicious. In the past, I sometimes found it unnerving to hear men shouting into a phone on public transport in a language I don't understand. Languages have their own distinct sounds; some are melodic, like Japanese, some are very harsh, like Turkish (personal opinion). I love all those different sounds, but I have to admit, with Turkish, I often get the feeling they're angry. Until I saw a Turkish series. A man was also shouting very loudly in Turkish on my screen. He seemed furious. But the subtitles told a completely different story: he was simply incredibly worried about the fate of a family member. This made me look at people who speak loudly in a harsh-sounding language in a different way. When I see them now, I feel less uncomfortable and I try to imagine that they are just very worried about their grandmother who is in the hospital.

Without subtitles... you acquire the intuitive heart of culture

The opposite is also interesting: watching a series in a language you don't know a word of, without subtitles. I did this this summer. It was a really fun experiment, but it took some getting used to. I couldn't endure it for long, so I had to limit myself to one episode at a time, because listening to pronunciation requires a lot of concentration. It's a bit like babies acquiring language. From this experiment, I discovered that the words you learn first seem to reflect the core of a culture. I remember watching Japanese series; it seemed like I knew twenty synonyms for polite words. While watching a Filipino series this summer, I learned the names for family members and the word " *rabaho* " first. From this, I conclude that Filipinos are people who value family and take pride in hard work.

It becomes even more interesting once you've watched enough shows and then, in one of them, a "foreign" language is spoken and you understand it, even though the main character doesn't. That's a new level of satisfaction. And quite funny, too, since I have to admit that—although I do learn vocabulary while watching shows—my knowledge of almost all languages is very superficial. It shows me that even a very superficial knowledge of a culture or language can still be meaningful.

Beauty ideals

By looking at the faces of the leads in romantic series, you also get a sense of the beauty ideals prevailing in a particular country. I've become quite adept at guessing whether an actor is from Japan, China, or Korea. Something I couldn't do before my series. All Asian countries seemed pretty much the same to me back then, both in terms of faces, sounds, and writing. Over the years, I've subconsciously learned to notice the nuances of these different yet similar cultures, which I consider a pretty cool superpower. 😊

In short:

Watching series teaches you so much, including appreciating different cultural aspects, whether it's specific humor, Bollywood music, or the tradition of drinking tea with neighbors on the sidewalk after a long day. I love (sub)cultures. Each one consists of a very specific blend of aspects that give them their distinctive flavor. Series are a perfect way to experience their flavors in their purest form and without breaking the bank on plane tickets.

Watching international series has made me an empathetic and even more curious person with more insight into the connections between countries, languages, cultures and history.

Japanese self-study

I've been studying Japanese in fits and starts for years. I've learned a lot from it. Not just the language itself (I'm not as far along as I could have been), but also certain insights.

As a student teacher, I was nearly bludgeoned with the expression "*learning is building on what you already know* ." My language studies have confirmed this and shown why my immersion experiment this summer isn't the most optimal way to acquire a language, even though babies do learn their native language this way. (A parent wouldn't normally start speaking to their newborn in overly complex sentences.) We come from a different culture and speak a different language. It helps to connect words with words in the language you already speak. Or better yet: a visual language that almost everyone "speaks." During my studies, I discovered that visual mnemonics is the best method for studying Kanji. Japanese children are exposed to this pictographic script from a young age; we aren't. They learn Kanji by filling pages with writing, but that doesn't mean we have to! Mnemonics is a really fun method, and I would recommend it to everyone. Although I discovered this study method through my language studies, you can also use it in other areas of study. For example, during my teaching internship, I also recommended my own students to use visual drawings when studying medical conditions. So, studying a language also helps with metacognition and discovering study methods.

As I mentioned before, the words you learn in a series without subtitles reflect the core of a culture, in my opinion. Language is therefore an expression of culture. This was one of the first things I noticed when learning Japanese. I found it remarkable that "*watachi* " (I) is rarely used in Japanese, while "I" is capitalized in English. To me, this reflects the Japanese mentality, which prioritizes the larger group over the individual, and the American/English mentality, which emphasizes individualism. I don't know if that's actually true, of course. But in my native language (Dutch), only important things are capitalized, and it feels a bit egocentric to capitalize "I." So, it's about my perspective, from my culture, on another culture.

Learning Japanese also made me realize how much countries influence each other, especially occupations. The similarities between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are not without reason.

Another thing I've learned is the importance of languages. Languages are a gateway, not only to their own culture, but also to other languages. It's no coincidence that I use English-language study materials. The best study materials are written in English. High-quality materials in Dutch are rare.

In Belgium, we take Dutch – our native language –, French, and English in secondary school, and I also briefly studied German. It's not that I hated these subjects, but I didn't particularly enjoy them either. It's only since I started studying Japanese on my own that I've seen its beauty and regret not having fully embraced these lessons. My passion for Japanese opened my eyes to other languages, but my basic knowledge of English paved the way to Japanese.

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