

# **A Place for Cross-Cultural Awareness in the ESL Classroom (at Japanese Colleges)**

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**(English as a Second Language)**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Although things and ideas foreign have been traditionally viewed as somewhat pernicious in Japan, 'Internationalism' has been a popular buzzword in the media and in academic circles for more than a decade. What internationalism really is seems difficult to define, but it should be safe to assume that it includes increased contact with different peoples and cultures, a more openness to things foreign and more cross-cultural understanding and exchanges. While more high school and college students have had study abroad and homestay experiences, real cultural exchanges and cross-cultural understanding in Japan and in Japanese classrooms have not kept pace with the stated goals of making Japan an "international" country, whatever that really means.

With the exception of their English conversation classes with foreign teachers, most of our college students will have had little or no interaction with or exposure to foreigners or a foreign culture when they graduate. Our students will have learned a lot about English and maybe something about English speaking culture too, but not much about how people from different cultures interact and how we view each other. Although language and culture are interrelated and arguably inseparable they are often taught as two distinct and separate subjects. While conversational competence relies significantly upon understanding the cultural aspects of discourse, most of the English language classes that my students had taken in high school and college were frequently taught in a cultural vacuum. The English textbooks they used are often written by Japanese, from a Japanese perspective, in discourse patterns that are directly translated from Japanese and void of any real cultural input from the target language. Conversely, when a foreign culture is taught at all in Japanese high schools and colleges more attention seems to be placed on the artifacts or outward trappings of that culture instead of presenting culture as a living human entity, intrinsically tied to the language.

Culture has been defined as “the ways of a people.” More often than not the ways of a people are praised by that same people while looked upon with suspicion or disapproval by others, and often in both cases with surprisingly little understanding of what those ways really are and mean (Lado 1986). Except for standard anecdotes about how an American ‘yes’ means yes and a Japanese ‘maybe’ means no, and how this can lead to awkward situations, “the ways of a people” is hardly touched upon. Little seems to be discussed about how we communicate with each other and what we say or don’t say to each other in our own cultural setting and how we say it. Just as significant, how we view each others’ culture, how we can learn from each other, what we admire about each others’ culture or what we find silly about each other is rarely touched upon either. As a result I feel that most of our students will graduate from an English language program without gaining a real appreciation or understanding of things foreign and may not be very well-equipped to function comfortably in a cross-cultural environment, whether here in Japan or abroad.

I first became interested in this subject when I was asked to teach a class called Cross-Cultural Communication at Tokai Women’s Junior College. My wife is Japanese so I thought that I was familiar enough with the subject matter. However this was the first time I had taught this course and the goals of the course were not clearly defined so I was not quite sure what I was supposed to teach. As a native speaker of the target language my presence in the classroom and interaction with the students is by definition a cross-cultural experience (Richards 1985). I felt that I had two alternatives, concentrate on raising students’ communicative competence by focusing on the cultural aspects of American English discourse or to increase their overall sensitivity and understanding of things foreign and subsequently help them become more ‘international’ in their outlook and be more understanding and accepting of things foreign. Eventually I decided to develop a course curriculum that could be better defined as cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity rather than cross-cultural communications. I wanted my students to be better able to define and articulate their own culture and acquire a better insight into other cultures. As I did not want to ignore the opportunity to increase conversational competence, a secondary goal of the course was to help increase their communicative competence by developing a better understanding of the cultural aspects of English discourse and communication. I tried to introduce cultural input into the verbal exercises and activities that the students participated in, and of course the class was conducted solely in English. Although the target culture was that of English-speakers I eventually tried to expand the scope of the course to enable the students to be more aware of other cultures in general as well as English speaking cultures.

In this paper I would like to introduce some of the material that I have developed and my rationale behind it. I would also like to present some of the positive feedback from my students on their gaining a better understanding of different cultures as well as their own. Although the material in this paper was designed for a cross-cultural communications class it can be used to bring cultural awareness into any ESL or English language classroom.

### **RAISING CULTURAL AWARENESS AND DEFINING OUR OWN CULTURE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

I found that most of our students had had minimal contact with foreigners and foreign culture and

had little exposure to cross-cultural issues. They hadn't really given a lot of thought to topics such as the difficulties that Japanese living in a different culture could encounter, what problems a foreigner living in Japan would have or what questions or statements are culturally insensitive, etc. Neither had they spend much time defining their own cultural identity; they had never had any need to do so. As Japan is culturally and ethnically (at least on the surface) homogeneous most of my students had never examined the issue of discrimination in Japan (excluding Korean-Japanese of course.) To them discrimination is South Africa and what white America does to blacks.

As a first lesson in a cross-cultural class, and with the initial goal of increasing our students' awareness and curiosity about their own cultural identity and how people of different cultural backgrounds relate to each other I briefly introduce myself and my experiences living in and with different cultures. I then ask the students to take a little cross-cultural quiz, like the one below.

Hello and welcome to this class. In this class I would like to share with you some of my cross-cultural experiences, here in Japan, and other countries. I would also like to talk about my experiences teaching Japanese students studying in the United States and England and discuss some of their cross-cultural experiences. I hope you will enjoy this class and will be able to learn about other (specifically English-speaking) cultures and therefore become better able to make any cross-cultural experiences you might encounter in the future more enjoyable.

Let me introduce myself. I have lived in Japan for seven years. My wife is Japanese, she was born in a temple and is herself a Buddhist priest. We occasionally have some difficulties and disagreements because of our different cultural backgrounds, but usually resolve our differences. I have also lived in Korea, Mexico and Nepal so I have had a lot of cross-cultural experiences and have experienced many cross-cultural difficulties as well!

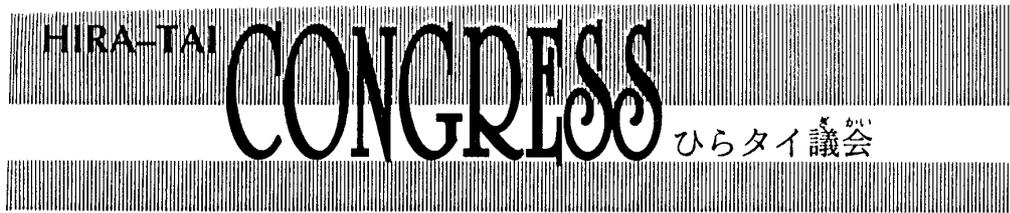
Please answer these questions:

- 1 . a) Have you ever lived, studied in or visited another country?  
b) Did you experience any difficulties because of cultural difficulties?
- 2 . Would you like to live, work or study in a foreign country? Why or Why not? (If yes, where would you like to go?)
- 3 . If you lived in a different country what cultural problems do you think you would have?
- 4 . Have you ever met any foreigners (not including me) in Japan? Who? Where?
- 5 . Do you think Japan is a good place for foreigners to live? (Why or why not)?
- 6 . What cross-cultural problems do you think foreigners have in Japan?
- 7 . Do you have any questions for me about my cross-cultural experiences?

The point of this first exercise is to allow the student to focus on how foreigners and Japanese interact here in Japan and what life is like for non-Japanese living in this country. It also gives the students a chance to consider what it is like to be culturally different and to think about how they would deal with living in a foreign culture. Students who have studied abroad can examine their own cross-cultural experiences and would have a much better understanding of how normal day to day activities, which we take for granted in our own culture, can become bigger than life

size problems and dilemmas because of cross-cultural issues.

A good follow-up exercise is a survey taken by the magazine, Hiragana Times, 'Is Japan a Good Place to Live?' (the respondents are split evenly amongst Japanese and Non-Japanese). The point of this survey is to present differences of perceptions about living in Japan based upon different cultural experiences in Japan. Before reading this article most of my students thought that foreigners shared the Japanese opinion that Japan is a very comfortable and easy place to live. The results of the survey found that more than two-thirds of the non-Japanese surveyed thought differently.



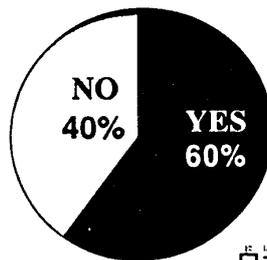
**Q** 日本はあなたにとって住みやすい国ですか?  
Is Japan an easy country in which to live?

日本は住みづらい—NJ読者の64%  
Japan is an uncomfortable country to live  
— Answered 64% of NJ readers

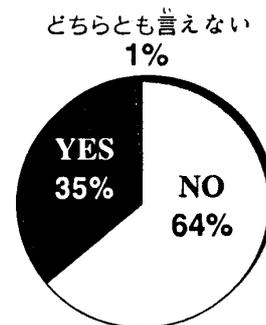
**A**

「日本はあなたにとって住みやすい国ですか?」という議案に対し、日本人読者の60%、NJ読者は、わずか35%がYESと答えた。

In response to the proposal, "Is Japan an easy country in which to live?" 60% of Japanese and only 35% of NJ readers said "Yes."



日本人読者  
Japanese Readers



NJ読者  
NJ (Non-Japanese) Readers

I think an important step in understanding a foreign culture is to gain a deeper understanding of your own culture and to be able to define your own cultural identity. When I ask my students to explain their culture to me I often draw a blank, what answers I do get are usually superficial and confined to explaining Japanese things or activities “Japanese culture is chopsticks, we wear kimono, we like bath...” A good publication that allows Japanese students to more deeply examine their own culture and see how other cultures interact within Japan and outside is the magazine I mentioned above, Hiragana Times. Hiragana Times is a cross-cultural magazine published in Tokyo and written in both English and Japanese. This magazine is ideal for enabling students to see their culture from another point of view, through actual interviews and articles featuring foreigners living in Japan. Hiragana Times also makes the target culture, (in this case English-speaking) more accessible and relevant to the university-aged student by discussing topics relevant to young Japanese and young people from around the world. Such topics as brand name goods, not giving your room key to your friends and the popularity of print clubs are presented. Not only does this magazine present western cultures to young college-aged Japanese but it presents feature interview with and articles about and by people from non-European cultures, many of which are English-speaking cultures as well.

There are lots of interesting aspects of Japanese culture but most of my students seem to have a hard time identifying and defining these (as do their American counterparts who have never left the US). An excellent book for providing topics on Japanese culture is ‘Explain Yourself. Explain Yourself uses visual stimuli and questions about the cultural and historical background of each situation, (visiting a shrine at New Year’s, Marriage, going to a shushi-ya, etc.). As most Japanese are interested in and like to explain things Japanese this book provides a wealth of material for general conversation classes as well. Once presented with topics related to Japanese culture and things that are uniquely Japanese students become eager to explain these aspects of their culture. Some of the topics often require the students to do more research on some of the history and background on these topics, enabling them to be more aware of and conversant about their culture. Although parts of this book are a bit dated I think it can be used to provide excellent opportunities for students to explain their culture in English. This book could be particularly helpful to students who are going to study abroad and will be asked about Japanese culture by young people they meet abroad. Explain Yourself and Hiragana Times provide the majority of reading material and handouts in my cross-cultural classes.



## SUSHI SHOP

### A

1. When did you last eat sushi?
2. Ask another student on what sort of occasion he visits a sushi shop.
3. What is *nigiri-zushi*? What is *maki-zushi*? What is *chirashi-zushi*? What is *tsukuri*?
4. Why is sushi a relatively expensive food?
5. Do you think this shop is expensive? Why or why not?
6. Do the customers look as if they are enjoying themselves?
7. What is the sushi-chef at the right doing?
8. What is the sushi-chef at the left doing?
9. Why do you think raw fish is so popular in Japan, and so little eaten in most other countries?
10. Ask the teacher if he likes sushi. If so, how long did it take him to acquire a taste for it. If not, why not?

### B

11. Which Western-style fish dishes do you know?
12. In which part of Japan is the best sushi made?
13. Why is it so difficult to make sushi at home?
14. How can you tell if sushi is fresh or not?
15. Which drinks go best with sushi? Why?
16. Ask another student why you are welcomed by "*Irasshai!*", never by "*Irasshaimase!*" in a sushi shop; and why the opposite applies in a *ryotei*.
17. Which fish can you see in the glass case on the counter?
18. Which is the best sushi? *Tai* [bream]? *Toro* [belly of tuna]? *Hamachi* [yellow tail]? *Ikura* [salmon roe]? *Uni* [sea urchin roe]? Etc. Compare flavour and texture. What about *sashimi*?
19. What is *wasabi*?
20. Can you think of a reason why sushi shops have their own special language, for instance *agari* for *o-cha*?

At the end of the course I might have my students give some sort of definition to their culture or cultural identity. After looking at their culture and gaining new perspectives on it I ask my students to do an exercise like this one.

### **Cross-cultural Communications**

This is our last class in Cross-Cultural Communications, I hope you enjoyed the class and learned something about we can better communicate across cultural barriers. In this last class I would like you to explain to me what Japanese culture means to you. So please imagine that you are talking to and trying to explain your culture and life in Japan to an interesting handsome young foreigner who you have met while studying abroad.

Interesting, Handsome Young Foreigner: Can you tell me about your culture in Japan? What are some interesting aspects of Japanese culture?

Your answer:

Interesting, Handsome Young Foreigner: Can you tell me about life in Japan, What do you do for fun? What is popular with young people?

Your answer:

Interesting, Handsome Young Foreigner: I hear a lot of things about, print club and Tamogochi. What are they? Why are they popular?

Your answer:

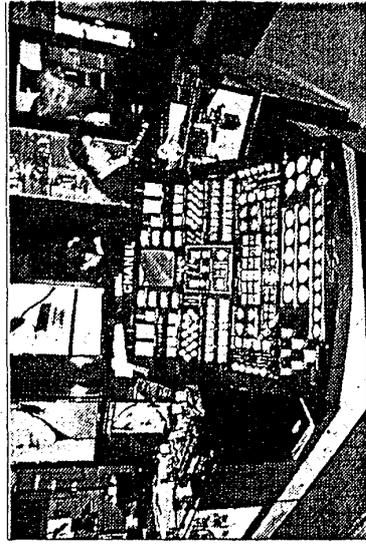
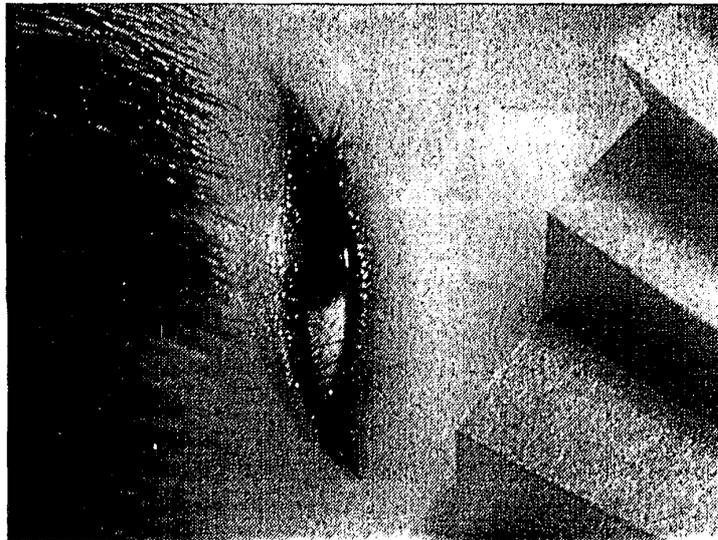
Interesting, Handsome Young Foreigner: Why are name brands so popular?

Your answer:

### Presenting Japanese culture from a non-Japanese point of view

Although most of most of my students would have difficulty reading and understanding newspaper articles from such publications as The Independent, The Los Angeles Times and The New York Times these papers regularly comment on many issues in Japan and on Japanese culture. Often they touch on subjects that could be considered taboo in Japan or get little exposure in the Japanese press, such as Burakumin. Other articles discuss current social phenomena like the hierarchical pecking order of playground moms in Tokyo or articles young college-aged women would find interesting, like the high cost of cosmetics in Japan or trend setting teenage girls. I try to simplify the text and then discuss what the article is about.

**FASHION / A SPECIAL REPORT**



Two displays from a Paris exhibition to celebrate 100 years of creations from Shiseido, Japan's biggest cosmetics maker; at right, foreign cosmetics, such as Guerlain and Chanel, on sale in Tokyo where prices remain high

# Why Making Up Is Hard to Do for Cash-Conscious Japanese

I have also used a joint NHK/BBC series called A Night in Japan. This documentary series presents and explains Japanese culture and social issues to a British audience. The episode that I used was about 'ijime' in a Japanese high school. It dramatizes the troubles a fourteen year old Japanese boy has when he returns to school in Japan after having spent some years in America. He speaks English better than his English teacher, is inquisitive and asks questions and therefore sticks out. He is consequently bullied for his being different. At one point in the film the boy's teacher explains to his grandfather, who wants to know why he is having problems, "Well he's not really Japanese, is he? That's why he can't fit in." In one scene another student who had spent time in America advises him privately (in English) not to do anything to draw attention to himself, don't speak English, don't be assertive, etc. I followed this with a film based on a real life troubled inner city high school in New Jersey. We compared the various social problems in both schools. Ijime, suicide, forced conformity and little sympathy for someone who is different in Japan with crime, drugs, illiterate graduates in the American high school. Interestingly the students themselves had little sympathy for the returnee who was bullied in the documentary, A Night in Japan. Some of my students thought he was haughty because he spoke English, asked questions of his teacher and was too proud. While they were able to identify and relate to the problem and disapproved of the violence that the lad was subjected to, they felt that he was guilty of breaking the social contract and therefore brought the bullying on himself. I felt that the boy was just naturally expressing himself. In the film Lean On Me, about the American high school, my students commented that teachers encouraged questions. They thought this was good and commented that a student who asked too many questions would be frowned upon or 'hated' by his teacher in Japan, like the boy in the NHK documentary. Although they thought this was an undesirable side of Japanese society they still blamed the boy for acting improperly by asserting himself and asking questions. I suppose they felt it was okay for him to act American in America but he should have reverted back to proper form here in Japan.

### DOUBLES-A BRIDGE BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

I presented the issue of people of mixed ancestry (Japanese/American) not only for the obvious reason that people of both cultures have a better understanding of the two cultures that we are discussing (Japanese & American) and therefore should be ideal representatives of cross-cultural understanding but also to bring to light typical stereotyping about people of mixed ancestry, and to discuss mixed marriages, the ultimate cross-cultural experience. I also wanted to touch upon the issue of discrimination in Japan. Not only were most of my students unaware of the fact that foreigners in Japan sometimes feel discriminated against but they were unaware of the difficulties and insensitivity that people of mixed ancestry face.

For this purpose I used an excellent NHK documentary called Doubles. This film presented interviews with Japanese-Americans in both English and Japanese. It also showed film from the late 1940's, featuring Miki Sawada's orphans, children of mixed race, fathered mainly by American GI's and Japanese women, who were abandoned by their parents. The film also shows interviews with them as adults and other people of mixed race who grew up in Japan and America from the end of the war until now. The documentary discusses the treatment of mixed-race children then and now as well as comparing their experiences in Japan and the US. The people

interviewed talked about how they were discriminated in both the US and Japan. These people also explain why they feel the term 'half' (1/2 of what?) is derogatory and insensitive. However the documentary ends on a bright note as the interviewees feel that they are greater than the sum of their two cultural selves and feel that they are bridges between the two cultures. I use this documentary over the course of three classes. Part one of the handout below is meant to get the students to examine their own views on cross-cultural marriages and the people who are products of cross-cultural marriages. Part two is meant to focus on specific incidents and people in the film and part three is a reaction to and feedback about the film.

### **DOUBLES**

I would like to show you a Video of an NHK television documentary called 'Doubles'. But first I would like you to think about some questions. Please write your honest feelings about these questions as best as you can!

#### **BEFORE YOU WATCH**

- 1 . What do you think about inter-cultural or inter-racial marriage? Would you marry someone from a different cultural or racial background?
- 2 . If you married someone from another country, culture or race what problems do you think you would have?
- 3 . What problems do you think children of mixed-blood (half Japanese/half foreigner) have?

#### **WHILE YOU WATCH**

- 1 . What did the boss of the orphanage (Miki Sawada/Mama-chama) tell the children of mixed-blood after the other children laughed and pointed at them?
- 2 . Why did the other children laugh and point at them?
- 3 . Why did this lady hate her American father?
- 4 . Why did this woman's father tell her a story about ice cream?

#### **AFTER YOU WATCH**

- 1 . Please write your reaction to this video. Which person's story impressed you the most? Why?

Please write a short summary of this video. In your summary please include your reaction to and feelings about this video and answer the following questions:

What problems did these people have in Japan? Did they face any problems in the US? Which person's story impressed you the most? Why?

Did anything make you sad, angry, happy? How would your life be different if you were of mixed blood? What would be better? What would be worse?

### **CONCLUSION**

At the beginning of this class the majority of these students had little exposure to foreign culture. In the initial questionnaire my students revealed that they had never really thought much about communicating with foreigners, about how foreigners in Japan live and what it would be like for

them to live in a foreign culture. They had not really been able to explain much about their own culture either. Their initial answers to questions asking to explain their culture ranged from responses such as; 'Japanese like bath, foreigners take showers', to 'Japanese culture is unique so it is difficult for foreigner to understand.' After reading some of the articles in Hiragana Times where people from various countries explained their cultures the same student came to realize that Japanese culture is unique in its 'Japanese-ness', but no more unique than Korean or German cultures are unique for their 'Korean-ness' or 'German-ness'. She also found out that foreigners do indeed take baths. Instead of a test I give the students the following survey and ask for feedback about the class and what they learned.

We will not have any test in this class but I would like to know what you learned from this class and what you thought of the material.

- 1 . What activity or lesson in this class was the most interesting for you? Why? What did you learn from it?
- 2 . What did you think of the magazine 'Hiragana Times'? Was it useful or helpful? What did you learn from it? Which article impressed you the most?
- 3 . What did you enjoy about this class and why? Was there anything you didn't like?
- 4 . After studying in this class what did you learn about communicating with peoples from different cultures? What did you learn about foreigners and foreign culture etc.?

My objectives for the class were modest in that I only wanted to expose our students to foreign cultures and to help them see that foreigners are people that they can communicate with while increasing their own cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity. I also hoped that this increased understanding and sensitivity would help increase their conversational competence and help them shed some reluctance to speak with foreigners. Hiragana Times and Doubles were the material that was most helpful in achieving these goals. What seemed to impress the students the most was Doubles. My students were not aware of the discrimination and hardships that people of mixed-race had to deal with in Japan. One student said 'I always thought they were 'kaku' and I envied them, I never realized how difficult it can be.' Another student said after watching 'Doubles' that she "...could know many feelings and experiences of mixed-blood people and foreigners."

Students also said that they had a better understanding of what happens in American high schools and the relationship between teachers and students and how they interact in the classroom. They could also see how Japan is viewed from other parts of the world through the BBC telecast and the newspaper articles.

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