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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Introducing Japanese culture and customs in English: Children as teachers

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Understanding both the culture and customs of one's own country, and those of the target language country is important in the study of a foreign language. By introducing Japanese culture and customs to foreigners in English, Japanese people become more interested in Japanese culture, and they are motivated in their study of English. In this paper, the authors look into the value of introducing Japanese culture and customs in English to Japanese elementary school students, then describe some of the activities and teaching methods used in the authors' classes, and finally consider the response of students and parents to these activities.

外国語を学ぶ際、異文化に興味を持つとともに、自国の文化にも興味を持つことが大切である。日本の文化を外国の人に紹介する事で、日本の文化に対する興味もより深まり、英語学習の動機付けにつながる。ここでは、子どもたちが簡単な英語を使って楽しく日本の文化を外国の人に紹介できるアクティビティーやその導入法を紹介する。また児童の反応、保護者・児童のアンケート結果やコメントなどに触れながら、その効果について検証する。

**Y**oshida (2003) says that as globalization continues to advance, so does the need for English as a common global language. An increasing flow of people from Japan to foreign countries and from foreign countries to Japan is one reason for globalization in Japan. The Ministry for Land, Infrastructure and Transportation (2006) announced that, in 2006, 17.54 million Japanese traveled overseas,

and 7.33 million foreign tourists visited Japan. According to the JNTO (2008), in 2007 the number of visitors to Japan had increased to 8.35 million. The opportunities for Japanese to encounter foreigners even within Japan would seem to be increasing. How then should English education respond to this situation?

### Why introduce Japanese culture in English?

“Communication with foreigners” is a goal for elementary school English education (MEXT, 2006). Ito (2004) says that learning English in elementary school is a foundational step to foster “communication and sharing with people of the world” and to develop international communication and internationalism. For Ito, “internationalism” is the “quality of being able to relate with people of the world,” and while it is of course important to learn the way of life, customs, and culture of foreign countries, it is also necessary for mutual understanding to know one’s own culture and customs, and to be able to share this knowledge with others.

The reality, however, points to shortcomings in the area of mutual understanding. Nakayama (2004) says that in the Japanese elementary school teaching situation, international exchange is only a “take” for the Japanese side, with almost no activities in which Japanese “give” something of their culture. Suzuki (2002) argues that Japanese people need “English that takes the initiative” (*hasshingata eigo*). At the elementary school level, how can students be engaged in activities that promote “English that takes the initiative”?

The authors include activities that introduce Japanese culture and customs in their elementary school English

lessons. From our observation, when children learn how to introduce Japanese culture using English, they raise their awareness of their own culture, show interest and feel secure in the familiarity of the content, and are motivated to use English. When children present Japanese culture in English for foreigners, they take pride in sharing their own culture, and communicate with confidence. According to Scott and Ytreberg (2001), children who have a sense of security and satisfaction in the classroom take the initiative and become boldly confident in their studies.

### Teaching materials and procedures

How can children use English to introduce Japanese culture? Our approach is as follows. We develop materials based on familiar aspects of culture and customs. We use simple, easy to remember, rhythmic English, language that can also be used in daily conversation. Students practice these materials in class through TPR, chants, songs, poems, and activities. The teacher presents, then students practice, first as a class, then with partners or in groups. In their own homes, children also enjoy becoming the leader when they introduce these activities to their families. When the students are ready, we also invite guests from foreign countries, so students then can teach aspects of their culture using the same activity-based, simple language approach.

Our use of hands-on activities and rhythmic, musical pieces in lessons introducing aspects of culture follows Stevick (1982), who has shown that, especially in pre-school and lower grade elementary school children, the brain’s sensory motor area is quite active and, through sensory experiences and movement, children can apprehend and

remember well. We also find that as children learn English using chants, for example, they naturally learn English rhythm and intonation, and enjoy speaking out (Fujiwara et al, 2007).

### Activities for introducing Japanese culture, customs, and games

The activities introduced here have been used with students of the authors in private and public elementary schools, and English language schools, and so are adaptable in a wide variety of teaching environments for elementary school students. A selection of activities we have developed and used follows.

#### *How to use chopsticks and chopsticks manners*

With the spread of Asian food culture, both the awareness of chopsticks and the number of people using them in other countries have increased. In Japan, being able to properly use chopsticks, and knowing the appropriate chopsticks manners allows one to dine confident of having good etiquette. This is the case for foreigners in Japan as well. For those Japanese children whose manners may have become sloppy, these activities are good opportunities to learn proper etiquette. In our lessons, children actually use chopsticks and speak English as they practice.

#### *How to use chopsticks*

##### *Chant*

1. Like a pencil, like a pencil, hold like this.
2. One more stick.
3. Here, don't move.
4. Top stick, top stick, up and down, up and down.

##### *Corresponding actions*

1. Hold a single chopstick like a pencil using the thumb, index finger, and middle finger.
2. Place the second chopstick at the joint between the thumb and index finger, resting the chopstick on the inside tip of the ring finger.
3. Point to the ring finger with a finger on the free hand.
4. Move the top stick only, up and down.

#### *Avoiding bad chopsticks manners*

##### *Chant or song*

(can be sung to the tune of “The Frog Song [Kaeru no Uta]” or “Skip to my Lou”)

1. Stick into food, no, no, no.
2. Dish and chopsticks, no, no, no.
3. Pass to chopsticks, no, no, no.
4. Wandering chopsticks, no, no, no.

*Corresponding actions*

1. Stick chopsticks into food.
2. Hold a dish and chopsticks together in the same hand.
3. Pass food from your own to another person's chopsticks.
4. Chopsticks wander over the dishes, unsure of which food to pick up.

*Japanese games*

Traditional Japanese games can be enjoyed to good rhythmic English.

*Osenbe yaketakana?*

This is a hand-slapping game something like “hot potato.” In Japan, rice crackers (*osenbe*) are traditionally grilled over a charcoal fire, turned over once, cooked on the second side, and then taken off the grill.

*Chant*

1. Rice cracker, rice cracker. Is it ready? Is it ready?
2. Yes! Turn it over!
3. Rice cracker, rice cracker. Is it ready? Is it ready?
4. Yes! Turn it over/ It's done!

*Corresponding actions*

To play, three to six students make a circle and hold out both hands in the center, palms down. The leader holds out only one hand, using the other hand to lightly slap each

outstretched hand in succession, chanting, “Rice cracker, rice cracker. Is it ready? Is it ready? Yes!” (a total of nine beats). When the leader, saying, “Yes,” slaps the last hand in the sequence, that player turns the slapped hand palm up as the group says, “Turn it over!” It has been grilled on one side. This continues, with the last slapped player in a sequence turning the slapped palm up. If the palm slapped on the beat of “Yes!” has already been turned up, that hand is put down and out of play as the group says, “It's done!” The last hand remaining in the circle is the winner.

*Ocharaka hoi**Chant*

1. *Ocharaka, ocharaka, ocharaka,*
2. *Hoi.*
3. *Ocharaka, I won/ I lost/ It's a tie.*
4. *Ocharaka, hoi.*

*Corresponding actions*

The two players face each other.

1. As the players chant *Ocharaka, ocharaka, ocharaka,* they clap first their own hands together, then alternately the opponent's opposite hand (three sets, a total of six beats, one for each *ocha* (own hands) *raka* (opponent's hands). Hands are held and clapped parallel to the ground.
2. On the beat of *Hoi* (the seventh beat), the players hold out a “rock,” “paper,” or “scissors” (*janken*).

3. Next, after a single *ocharaka*, clapping first their own hands (the first beat), then both opponent's hands simultaneously (the second beat), the winner of the preceding janken raises both hands and says, "I won," and the loser, lowering both hands and bowing head, "I lost." If it was a tie, both players put hands on hips and say, "It's a tie."
4. Step three is then repeated, with a two-beat *ocharaka* followed by a *hoi* and janken. This can be repeated many times, with challenge increased by doing it faster. The player who can keep on playing longest without breaking the rhythm and making a mistake is the winner.

#### *Acchi muite hoi (Look that way!)*

##### *Chant*

1. Rock, paper, scissors, go!
2. Look that way! (Don't follow my finger!)

##### *Corresponding actions*

1. Two players face each other and do janken.
2. The winner points index finger at the loser and says, "Look that way!" pointing either up, down, or to one side. The loser then must look in a direction other than the one in which the winner is pointing.

#### *Origami and Children's Day*

In this activity, children make *origami* carp flags and a warrior's helmet, and then use these to explain the Japanese Children's Day traditions. The instructions for origami typically found in English are full of difficult expressions, and impossible for most children to follow. But with a limited number of simple instructions, even young children can explain how to do origami.

##### *Basic origami expressions*

If children can learn the following expressions, they can use them in various orders to teach many types of origami.

- Fold like this.
- Press, press.
- Do the same.
- Upside down.
- Turn it over.
- Fingers in and open this.
- Do like this.
- It's done.

In Appendix 1 (our original material) we explain, using TPR, how to make a typical origami craft, the warrior's helmet (*kabuto*), which can easily be changed into a carp (*koi*). These can be used together in a Children's Day craft activity: Draw a Japanese house with a flagpole outside, then paste origami carp on the pole and a warrior's helmet inside the house. Students can use the craft to explain Children's Day in a simple presentation or conversation:

*Presentation*

May 5 is Children's Day. We put up carp flags outside, and display a warrior's helmet in the house.

*Conversation*

A: When is Children's Day?

B: It's (on) May 5.

A: What do you do on Children's Day?

B: We put up carp flags outside, and display a warrior's helmet inside the house.

A: Why do you put up carp flags?

B: The carp is a strong fish. Parents want their children to be strong, too.

**Survey and results**

In the private elementary school where we teach first and second grade English classes, students learned Japanese games and chopsticks manners in English. The students then took the lead in introducing these games and manners at home in English. Parents were surveyed regarding these activities; 141 out of 155 parents responded.

***Survey results and comments from parents***

A. What do you think of teaching Japanese culture in English class?

1. It is a very good idea. (82.3%)

2. It is a good idea. (15.6%)

3. It is not a very good idea. (1.4%)

4. It is a bad idea. (0%)

(1 person did not answer.) (0.7%)

B. How was the experience of using English to play Japanese games at your home?

1. It was very enjoyable. (67.4%)

2. It was enjoyable. (29.8%)

3. It was not very enjoyable. (2.1%)

4. It was boring. (0%)

(1 person did not answer.) (0.7%)

C. Did this study become an opportunity to experience English at home?

1. It was a very good opportunity. (61.0%)

2. It was a good opportunity. (36.9%)

3. It was not a very good opportunity. (2.1%)

4. It was not a good opportunity at all. (0%)

D. Please write any other opinions you have. (The number of responses is in parentheses. Some wrote more than one comment.)

- Parents and child, grandparents too enjoyed the time—even got really excited about it. (20)

- It was good to look at Japanese culture, and explain things in English. (17)

- We were pleased and surprised to see our child feel he was special as he took the leadership in our family for these activities. (15)
- We want more activities like this that incorporate things familiar to us. (15)
- I want my child to be able to introduce Japanese culture to others in the world. (14)
- We enjoyed doing these cultural and manners activities in English. (11)
- We can play the games with foreign friends. (10)
- It was fresh to encounter again in English the games we knew as children. (9)
- Interest will lead to progress in English, so the project is good. (7)
- I was surprised to find my child's pronunciation so good. (7)
- We could sense English as something close to our lives. (7)
- It was not like study, but rather a chance to see improvement in conversation. (5)
- It was good to learn Japanese culture along with English. (5)
- This game can be done easily anywhere – restaurant, hospital, on the way home – while waiting for something. (3)
- As we are forgetting Japanese culture, this was a good chance to recall. (2)
- Japanese games should be taught in Japanese first. We would rather learn western games. But my child really enjoys the activities. (2)

### *Comments from students*

After the grade two students had introduced chopsticks use and manners and Japanese games to foreign guests, we asked them to write freely their comments on the experience. The comments are listed here, along with the number of students (in parentheses) who made each comment. (78 students responded. Some wrote more than one comment.)

- I was happy I could teach Japanese manners and games using English. (17)
- I was excited to speak in English, and happy to be understood. (12)
- It was fun to do activities together. (11)
- I was happy the guests learned when I taught how to use chopsticks. (10)
- I was happy the guests were pleased to learn from me. (9)
- It was fun. I want to teach many other people. (5)
- I was surprised that even I could teach how to use chopsticks. (4)
- I want the guests to come again. (2)

- I hope the guests are still using chopsticks the way I taught. (2)
- I want to teach many other things too. (2)
- I was a little nervous. (2)
- It was a little difficult. (2)
- I want to speak English more fluently. (1)
- I was surprised when the guests came, but relieved when I could teach how to use chopsticks. (1)
- Others (2)

### Discussion

The games we introduced were familiar to parents and siblings, so that they could easily be played in English at home. The physical contact that the games promote made for good parent-child communication (Furukawa, 2006). As the games require no equipment, they could be enjoyed any time and place by all family members, making many chances to use English. Also, chopsticks are used daily, making possible repeated practice using English. As some children resist parents' "nagging" attempts to teach manners, the English medium made for fresh and natural learning opportunities. We were also surprised to find that this program led not only to English being spoken at home, but to enjoyable time communicating as a family, according to many of the parents responding. Many parents said they were looking forward to more of the same kind of activities.

Some children commented that they were happy they could communicate a part of their culture to foreigners. Some said they wanted to invite more foreign guests and to introduce other aspects of Japanese culture. After learning the activities, children during recesses and at other times could be seen playing together the games they had learned, and extending and making up their own variations of the activities. These student responses encourage reflection on the role of the teacher. Yoshida (2003) says that it should not only be teachers that give to students: teachers need to adopt things that students themselves have real confidence doing and want to share with other students. Also, according to Koike (2003), when something is fun or interesting, the brain is stimulated and one becomes "motivated," and "creative," reactions our students seemed to exhibit. Encouraged by the above responses, the authors hope to continue developing and using more activities introducing Japanese culture in English.

### Conclusion

As globalization continues to bring more Japanese, including children, into contact with foreigners, familiarity with activities of the kind described in this paper may in some small way help children be better prepared to reach out, to take the initiative in sharing with foreigners. They will have tools, and perhaps a bit more confidence, to introduce something of Japanese culture and customs, in English, to those non-Japanese they meet both in Japan, and abroad. These children will also have the experience of being a "teacher" of Japanese customs or traditions, and of English, in their own homes, and to foreign guests in the classroom.

English may begin to seem to be not just an object of study, but a vehicle for enjoyable, significant communication. It opens doors both back into their own culture and traditions, and outward to the larger world. We hope that this paper offers hints to others who share our vision for children as teachers, as bridge-builders, as sharers of culture.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1

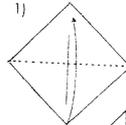
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#### ORIGAMI

#### Let's make a warrior's helmet (*Kabuto*)!

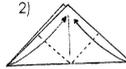
- 1) White side up.  
Fold in half.

Press, press.



- 2) Fold this up.  
Do the same.

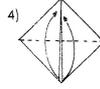
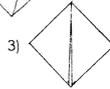
Press, press.  
Press, press.



- 3) Upside down.

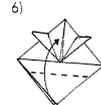
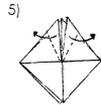
- 4) Fold this up.  
Do the same.

Press, press.  
Press, press.



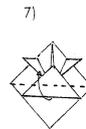
- 5) Fold like this.  
Do the same.

Press, press.  
Press, press.



- 6) Top flap  
Fold like this.

Press, press.



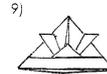
- 7) Fold like this.

Press, press.



- 8) Fold in half.  
Open it and tuck this in.

Press, press.



- 9) Now you have a warrior's helmet. (It's done.)

#### Let's make a carp flag (*Koinobori*)!

- 1) - 4) same as above

- 7) Fingers in and fold like this.

Press, press.



- 8) Fold this back.

Press, press.

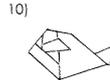


- 9) Fold like this.

Press, press.



- 10) Now you have a carp. (It's done.)



#### Children's Day

When is children's day?

Children's day is (on) May fifth.

What do you do?

We put a warrior's helmet in the house, and carp flags outside. (The carp is a strong fish.)

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