



All my students could relate to Nana and Jan



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Guiding Principle:

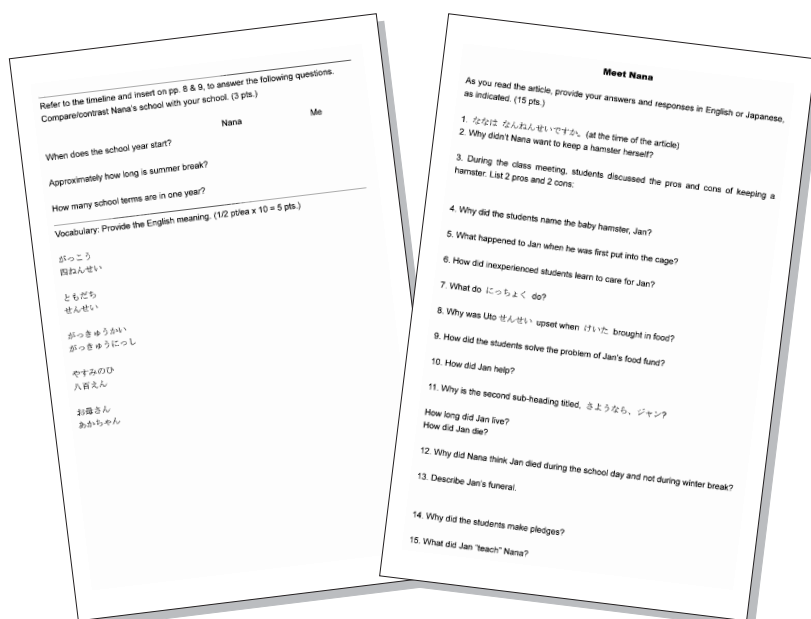
A classroom, I believe, should be a forum for the exploration of ideas and the free exchange of opinions. The process of learning is like that of making a new friend. Topics and content should be relevant and students should have the opportunity to experience the joy of discovery as they explore the subject matter.

As students explore concepts, I challenge them to recognize, appreciate, and evaluate similarities and differences. I believe this approach helps students gain a deeper self-awareness and develop a more tolerant attitude toward other points of view. It is my hope to cultivate a desire in students to learn about the world and to challenge them to become productive global citizens who share a sense of mutual understanding and respect.

I loved the article, "Meet Nana!" I assigned it to my sixth grade class as homework, with a guided reading worksheet, and then we discussed the content and students' reactions in class. The article touches on the dynamics of a Japanese classroom and student relationships. The description both of student reactions to Jan's untimely death and of the way they held the funeral conveys perfectly a culture-specific attitude toward death. The timeline of school activities and the footnotes explaining class details are very easy to understand.

As we reviewed the article, we explored similarities and differences in customs and cultural attitudes. Even though my students were not able to understand the page from the "Jan Notebook," they could grasp something of the meaning of the words from the pictures. All students seemed to be able to relate to Nana's concern for Jan. They understood what is involved in keeping a class pet because many schools here do this in the fifth grade. They also related to Nana's feelings about the commitment she would have to make to keep a pet of her own.

Best of all, we had the chance to theorize (guess) as to the cause of Jan's death. This allowed students to relate to the story on an individual and personal level. We talked about the details of the Buddhist funeral ceremony and discussed the concept that maybe Jan had died at a certain time in consideration for the students. This way of seeing interaction between human beings and animals seems to be typically Japanese, and yet it is the sort of thing even we Westerners can easily imagine.



Shaver's worksheet



The Japan Forum
Newsletter No.22
Meeting People:
Meet Nana

Japanese Culture Now

キャラクター Media Characters: A New Necessity of Daily Life

Kyarakuta (キャラクター), taken from the English word “character,” is the general term for the human, animal, and other personae that appear in manga comics, animated television programs, movies, computer games, and other media. Manufacturers often use characters to sell products.

According to a survey of respondents ranging in age from seven to their sixties conducted in 2000 by the Bandai Character Laboratory, a toy research institute, the proportion of Japanese who owned character goods stood at 83.9 percent, and 87 percent responded that they had a favorite character. Just looking at men in their fifties and sixties, 54.7 percent owned some kind of character goods and 64 per-

cent said they had a favorite character. Nowadays, media characters are popular among people of all ages, and there is nothing unusual in owning or using character goods.

The character goods market in Japan is enormous, at over 2 trillion yen per year. Characters from Japanese manga like *Pokémon* (ポケモン) and *Gundam* (ガンダム) have grown in popularity not only in Asia but also in the United States in recent years, making the “character business” a big business not only in Japan but worldwide.



Photo: Hongo Jin

“Characters” Everywhere

Rarely will you go through a whole day without setting eyes on some sort of trademarked character. They adorn ballpoint pens, notebooks, and other stationary products, cosmetic accessories like hand-held mirrors and makeup pouches, dangle from mobile phone straps and backpacks, and turn up on T-shirts, and bicycle bumpers.

“Characters” are effective attention-getters; they can soften the image of something that seems dull and uninteresting and make approachable things that seem complicated or daunting. Many banks now offer customers bankbooks, cash cards, and other business items sporting media character designs in addition to plainer, more conventional designs. Some characters are also originally created expressly for marketing businesses, events, and products.

Photo: Hongo Jin



Politicians as “Characters”

The approval rate for the cabinet of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro (小泉純一郎 こいずみじゅんいちろう), formed in April 2001, initially exceeded 80 percent, and some of its members were the talk of the television talk shows. Not only the prime minister enjoyed the media limelight: former foreign minister Tanaka Makiko (田中真紀子 たなかまきこ) was known as Makiko Daijin (マキコ大臣 [だいじん] “Minister Makiko”) and the elderly finance minister, Shiokawa Masajuro (塩川正十郎 しおかわまさじゅうろう), was dubbed Shio-jii (塩 [しお] じい “Grandpa Shio”). Their style of speech, mannerisms, looks, and other characteristics unrelated to their caliber as politicians became the object of popular fascination, forming an extraordinary fad. For real-life politicians to be treated along the same lines as trademarked characters and treated like popular TV personalities was a provocative and unprecedented occurrence in Japan.

The Liberal Democratic Party itself, of which Prime Minister Koizumi is a member, entered into the trademark character business by creating the character “Shishiro” (シシロー Mr. Lion—a reference to the prime minister's wavy “mane” of hair; *shishi* means lion) to “market” Prime Minister Koizumi as “the lion-hearted” prime minister. Aside from selling Koizumi-character goods like T-shirts, mugs, hand towels, stickers, fans, mobile-phone straps, etc., for the purpose of party publicity, the Liberal Democratic Party even offered desktop backgrounds and computer games featuring the prime minister.



Photo: TJF

Mom and Dad Love Characters, Too

In Japan today, anime and manga are forms of entertainment anyone can enjoy, regardless of age. Men who were ten years old in 1963 when the animated TV program *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu* 鉄腕 [てつわん] アトム) was first broadcast turned forty-nine this year. Likewise, women who were ten years old in 1967 when the Rica-chan (リカちゃん) doll was first brought on the market are now forty-five. Nowadays, the greater part of society is made up of men and women who were raised on character goods featuring heroes and heroines from earlier TV shows that captured their imaginations as children. To dismiss anime and manga as somehow reserved for childhood is now considered old-fashioned. Superhero and animation series like *Ultraman* (*Urutoraman* ウルトラマン), *Masked Rider* (*Kamen Raida* 仮面 [かめん] ライダー), *Sazae-san* (サザエさん), and others, first aired 30 years ago, are now being broadcast in newly produced form, and it is not unusual to find two generations—children and their parents—enjoying them in front of the television each week.