



Everyday Life in Japan (Mystery Box)

Catherine McCoy

Sussex Heights, Huntingdale,
and Gardenvale Primary Schools
Victoria, Australia



Ages: 6–11 years old
Level: Beginning
Culture: Experiencing objects used in everyday Japanese life
Japanese: Review of questions such as *Kore wa nan desu ka*



Objectives

This lesson is directed at children in grades preparatory to grade six, modified accordingly for each year level. Children of this age, especially in the lower grades, have low attention spans and no real ability of abstract thought. With this in mind, this hands-on activity is designed to be active in its approach and interesting in its content. A "mystery box" filled with realia allows the students to see, touch, feel, smell, hold, hear, and experience a part of Japanese culture. The questions asked and the artifacts shown stimulate children's interest in Japan, its people, and its culture.

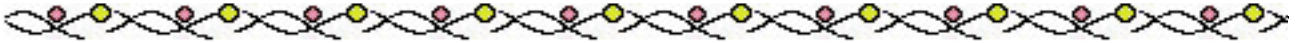
My students have no real comprehension of the number of people who live in Japan compared to Australia, the difference in size between our two countries, and the consequent different lifestyles we lead because of this. Children only ever get a secondhand view of Japanese culture through videos, books and games, yet this activity gives them a first-hand experience of Japanese culture. The success of this lesson lies in the items chosen for the mystery box. Although they may be trivial and irrelevant to us, they serve as a great interest and bemusement for children of elementary age.

The mystery element of questions such as What is it? and Where is it from? keeps the children's attention and interest. The questions allow for higher levels of thought to be employed and learning processes to be used by the students in order to participate in the lesson. This approach takes children from knowledge- and skills-based learning and

thinking into the analysis and synthesis levels, thus making this lesson an invaluable aspect of my Japanese curriculum.

Materials

1. Mystery box: A decorative box, cardboard box from Japan, or a box covered with Japanese paper or drawings.
2. Mystery box contents: Basic criteria are that all items are different in Australia or not found in Australia.
 - mustard and tomato sauce sachets
 - Coca-Cola cans bought from dispensing machines
 - hot coffee cans brought from dispensing machines
 - Mr. Donuts' or other companies shop bags that donuts are purchased in
 - margarine boxes
 - toothpaste packages
 - shampoo bottles(small)
 - Tupperware plastic items
 - furoshiki*
 - obentō* boxes
 - pictures of Japanese schoolbags
 - place mats from restaurant tables
 - photographs of Japanese toilet
 - complimentary napkins (serviettes), etc. from restaurants
 - lolly wrappers
 - soap powder boxes



- Japanese children's books
- maneki neko*
- daruma*
- otedama*
- television guide
- railway tickets
- Japanese money
- kendama*
- stationery items used at school by students
- school slippers
- koi-nobori*
- tissue packets distributed at stations
- Japanese tourist brochures of Australia
- kitchen utensils used in Japanese cooking
- McDonald's wrappers
- department store wrapping and packaging
- automatic teller receipts and photographs of machines

- Dono yō ni tsukaimasu ka.*
- Why?
- Dōshite.*
- Where would you buy it in Japan?
- Nihon de wa doko de kore o kaimasu ka.*
- Which is (used for...)?
- Dochira o tsukaimasu ka.*
- Can you buy it in Australia?
- Ōsutoraria de kaemasu ka.*
- Where do you buy it?
- Doko de kaimasu ka.*
- Where could we do the same in Australia?
- Doko de onaji koto ga dekimasu ka.*
- Is this a good idea?
- Ii desu ka. (Ii to omoimasu ka.)*
- Why?
- Naze.*

Procedure

1. Teacher shows children the mystery box and asks them what they think it is. "*Nan desu ka.*"
2. Teacher reviews basic Japanese grammar on the board. Children in the upper grades have studied Japanese and are familiar with basic question forms in Japanese. Questions can be asked in English in the lower grades. Questions can include:
 - What is it?
 - Nan desu ka.*
 - Where is it from?
 - Doko kara desu ka. (Doko kara kimashita ka.)*
 - How would it be used?

3. Teacher takes items out of the box one at a time and asks questions in Japanese. Questions can be asked in English depending on the learning level of the students. However, children respond to the Japanese regardless of their level of learning because they know a question is being asked by the rise in intonation. Additionally, since the questions asked are relatively the same for each item, perhaps one short English explanation at the start will suffice and the rest in Japanese will be understood.

Additionally, you could have picture cues for each question. For example, have a picture of a shop for *Doko kara desu ka.* [*Doko kara kimashita ka.*], a map of Australia for *Ōsutoraria de wa doko de kaimasu ka.*, etc., and point to these when asking a question.

Children answer in English and discuss what



each item could be. After many proposed scenarios to each question, teacher explains what the item is and what it is used for in Japan. It is helpful to give firsthand accounts for each, but vicarious experience through your own study and reading is just as worthwhile. Teacher places each item on display.

4. Children are given pictures of the items; they cut and paste each picture in their books. Beneath each picture they write its name, the way it is used in Japan and an explanation if relevant. Class may do this in groups or individually depending on year level. In lower grades, enlarge the pictures and make one whole display with the name, explanation, etc. written by the teacher based on the children's own recollections.
5. Throughout the week, artifacts are displayed in the passageway for children to show their parents and class teachers. This completed work is sent home for the students to explain to their parents as a homework activity. The class display in the younger grades is made into a book when taken down and sent home one child at a time. This recall of experience is important in the learning process as it relates Japanese to children's life experiences at home and at school.
6. This year the children who were learning *hiragana* for the first time pasted the pictures in and wrote explanations but they did not write the name of each item. Then after a ten week process of teaching them *hiragana*, we've just gone back through our books and written the names of each of the items in Japanese script as an aural activity. Now they are taking their work home to explain what the items are and the purpose of each. Also, they are showing their parents how they read and write Japanese. This interchange of English with Japanese script is very refreshing and pleasing to watch, as they switch between two languages and writing forms so easily.

Student Response

Common answers students gave upon seeing the items were:

- furoshiki*— tea towels
- Mr. Donuts' bag—airport flight bag
- maneki neko*— children's toy
- tissue packets—bought from a pharmacy (chemist)
- department store wrapping paper—from really exclusive stores
- margarine box—cake mix packet
- coffee can— lemonade can
- coffee can— bought cold or heated at a milkbar
- daruma*—very interested in a culture where people are genuinely hopeful, even adults!
- Tupperware—thought Japanese Tupperware was funny because it is the same as ours—good to have but sits in the cupboard never to be used again
- McDonald's wrapper—very interesting, amazed at fish varieties offered on menu, astounded at price for meal deals
- Japanese tourist brochures on Japan—too abstract initially. Class follow-up on images of Australia overseas was covered in social studies, and promotional language use was covered in Japanese.





Culture and the Foreign Language Class

We are all the same in so many respects: We all have the same needs of home and safety, wants of home and family, love of life in playing and singing and interests in music and art, yet we are all different in the way we achieve and attain these needs and wants because of the culture in which we grow up. Where we live modifies our needs, wants, interests, etc., in a way that is unique to our own country. Regardless of the distance between Australia and Japan, our children share so much in common; family, school, transport, money, games, songs, television, food, drink, etc., yet these things differ according to our culture. Aspects of Japanese life are different to life in Australia because of a variety of different reasons. Each item in the mystery box gives an insight into Japanese life for some children and people who live in some large cities in Japan.

When I reflect on my role as a Japanese teacher in an elementary school, I ask myself where I belong in the learning and developmental process of my students. For my role to be important, learning Japanese must be relevant to the students and enhance their development.

I take heart in the following benefits: When you acquire a new language, your knowledge and understanding of your own language improves and increases. The learner develops as a person when he/she participates in another culture. In gaining an

understanding of the similarities and differences between our cultures, the children become more tolerant of others. Learning any second language offers the learner the potential to enhance their intellectual and social development. In addition, in Australia, knowing Japanese offers children the potential to use their Japanese for vocational purposes; trade, tourism, etc. As our world becomes smaller as technology brings us closer together despite geographical distance, culture becomes even more relevant to language learning.

On a personal level, my students learn and develop because they have a relationship with me. We work together as a team. My students enjoy and experiment with Japanese because I enjoy and experiment with Japanese. My students have a keen interest in and love of the culture of Japan; I too have a love and interest. I create a safe environment which says to them, "It's all right to have a go! It's O.K. to give it a try!"

We are the bridge that connects our students to the reality of Japan, its culture, and its people. We are Japanese teachers. But we are more than just importers of knowledge, we are role models—role models for intercultural understanding.



Comments from the Feedback Committee

Educating for Cross-cultural Understanding

Elementary school age children are active learners in their environment at home, at school, and in the community. Anything that captures students' attention and gets their minds engaged has the potential to produce learning; without that, there will be no learning. There are three primary factors that influence what they pay attention to: familiar things, interesting things, and things that makes sense.

This lesson uses those factors well. The concrete items that are displayed in school look familiar but are originally from Japan. "I think I know that but how is it different from what I know?" "What does it have to do with me?" The children's attention is caught. "What is that? Well, I am going to find out." Their interest is piqued and they are sent on their way to learn more.

Teaching a foreign language and culture is a challenge not only for the teacher but also for the learners because the target culture is so far removed from them. A good "hook" is needed, and the mystery box is an excellent one. As Ms. McCoy says, "The success in the lesson lies in the items chosen for the mystery box." This is where the art or skill of teaching a foreign language and culture comes in. Teachers meet different challenges in different educational environments. The contents of Ms. McCoy's mystery box are unique to her environment.

It goes without saying that the teacher's research on the function and meaning of each item in the mystery box before class must be immense. A skilled teacher questions in a variety of question forms with interrogative adverbs and gives efficient guidance to students. The teacher's questions are another way to guide students to investigation, discussion, and evaluation, and are an important asset to the three factors of attention that drive learning.

When the students are encouraged to present their findings to students and teachers at their home base and family members at home, the knowledge gained after investigation in the Japanese classroom becomes their own. This process of strange to familiar, familiar to strange is the beginning of a chain reaction to attention and learning. As Ms. McCoy says, "Although trivial and irrelevant to us, the items in the mystery box serve as a great interest and bemusement for children of elementary age." I am assuming that the first presentation of the items from the mystery box was done by the teacher who collected the items. In the long run, students themselves could also search for items from Japan to add to the mystery box, trying to find out about the functional and cultural aspects of each before the presentation in class.

Language Learning

There were a lot of food and toiletry packets that were different in Australia. The reading of the names on the packet would be an interesting review of phonetic letters for the students. Here are some additional ideas for items to put into mystery box:

- A Japanese newspaper
- A Japanese paperback (*bunko-bon*)
- A photograph of Japanese traditional cakes and candies
- A Japanese comic book
- A photograph of a Japanese wedding
- Japanese tea leaves
- A Japanese calligraphy brush
- A math test

