

Who Am I? Who Are They?

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Ages: 16–17 years old
Level: Beginning
Culture: Self-introduction; *omiai*.
Japanese: Expressions for introducing oneself, used in conjunction with Lesson 1 of *Japanese for Busy People, Book 1*

Objectives

We try to include 20 percent culture in every lesson to balance it with 20 percent each of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Our textbook is *Japanese for Busy People, Book 1* (Kodansha International, 1994), and we base our cultural activities on the final skit presented on the video linked to that book. This gives us a program of 30 cultural topics. We give this program the title "Who Am I? Who Are They?" as we feel it introduces the ideas of individualism versus groupism; it allows the students to start with themselves (familiar) and move towards the Japanese, though this may not be directly relevant to every lesson.

The plan here relates to Lesson 1 and is the most important lesson for setting the pattern for the year. It deals with self-introduction and *omiai*. Self-introduction encourages the students to start talking and they can immediately say something to Japanese visitors. The topics of *omiai*, dating, etc. fascinate all teenagers!

This is a lesson plan for the last 40-minute session of a 200-minute block of teaching. The students have become familiar with the material contained in the chapter and have done a variety of listening and speaking exercises based on self-introduction, identifying people and objects, and on nationality. In reading and writing they have covered the basic table of sounds in *hiragana* at a first-look level (*Hiragana* in 24 minutes!). All work so far has been conducted in the target language.

Materials

- sheets of brown paper (2 × 1m, or larger if cutting and measuring is considered a useful skill)
- black insulating tape (at least 8m)
- a coffee table
- cushions for *zabuton*, even if not quite large enough
- student name cards
- task cards:
 - instructions for making *tatami*
 - instructions for fetching coffee table
 - instructions for rehearsing scene (script in *rōmaji* and cast list included)
- video on *omiai* (*Nihongo: Japanese for Busy People*, Ask Kodansha, 1986)

Procedure

1. Teacher: *Jā, minasan, seki ni modotte kudasai. Suwatte kudasai.* (Equivalent exhortations are used constantly.) *Mata video o mimashō.* (They have already watched video up to the end of the policeman and robber scene.) *X-san, video o tsukete kudasai.* (These commands are accompanied by much miming and prompts from other members of the class in English.) (3 minutes)
2. Watch video without comment up to the end of the speaking. (2 minutes)
3. Teacher turns off video and waits for reaction. Depending on the class, there will be a hesitancy

about speaking English at this point, so the teacher may have to give a prompt in English ("Well, any thoughts...") to encourage the students to describe what they have just seen—the introduction sequence. The teacher then



asks first for similarities and then for differences between that and a similar type of scene (difficult sometimes to imagine) in England. Obviously far more differences are noted, and a list is made on the board for a) the room, b) the people, c) the situation—here the teacher gives a very brief description of the idea of *omiai* and *nakōdo*. There is usually no problem with the language, but most students will not have remembered the two names and may also not have realized the order in which they are said. (7 minutes)

4. Replay video to same point. (2 minutes)
5. Recall the names. (1 minute)
6. Play video to the end. (1 minute)
7. Allow time for 'joke' to register and for a little discussion. (4 minutes)
8. Produce two large sheets of brown paper and some black insulating tape and have one group of three students produce two *tatami* mats; have two pupils go and borrow the low coffee table from the staff room, allocate the five roles in the skit to three groups of five students. The allocation of jobs is done by shuffling the students name cards, picking groups, and handing task cards to each group. This process may be unfamiliar the first time, but it quickly becomes routine and cuts down the need for lengthy talking in English by the teacher. The

words on the task cards become increasingly Japanese as reading skills improve. Five cushions are already available. (5 minutes)

9. Once the preparations are complete, the first of the four groups (a fourth group is formed from those who made mats and collected the table—this group goes last) acts out the scene (give help with taking off shoes and how to sit on *zabuton*). They may use their own names or Japanese names as they wish; they are followed by the other three groups. (8 minutes)
10. Ask each "actor" to analyze the role they played as young man, young woman, introducer, male go-between and female go-between; also ask all to think about the idea of sitting on the floor—the kind of behavior dictated by the situation, etc. The teacher should intervene as little as possible, only giving factual information when asked and not volunteering opinion, letting the students voice their own ideas at this stage. (5 minutes)
11. Teacher summarizes, stressing that "Rome wasn't built in a day" and that the students have now had their first glimpse of what is involved in a study of Japanese culture. Ask students to think about what they have done in the lesson and bring any questions to the next cultural session, which will focus on the use of the telephone. (2 minutes)
12. Pack up material and tidy room before final *kiritsu*. (1 minute)

Student Response

1. I asked my students what they had learned which was new. They listed:

- a. The size and structure of a *tatami* mat
 - b. How to sit on a *zabuton* (and how difficult it is not to wriggle)
 - c. How to bow when sitting
 - d. How to conduct and take part in brief self-introductions
 - e. That the Japanese have arranged marriages
 - f. That the Japanese also make love matches
 - g. That both e. and f. can use go-betweenes
 - h. That men (younger) may be less familiar with traditional polite behavior than women
 - i. That women still wear *kimono* on some occasions while men very rarely do
2. When asked what stimulated their interest, students replied:
- a. Seeing the video
 - b. Acting out the video
 - c. Discussion in English (Note that other parts of the lesson are in the target language.)
 - d. Making plans to ask their Japanese penfriends their views on arranged marriage
 - e. Realization that the language they'd learned is actually used in Japan, not just in the textbook!
3. What do the students feel is similar or different to their own culture? The answer to this question depends very much on the cultural background of the students: their class background, their educational level, and on many other contributory factors. England is a multicultural society, and we have ethnic minorities where arranged marriages are common. Even where students have had no contact with members of those minorities they are aware of their existence from the multicultural education program they receive in school—usually at primary level but continued in religious education classes at higher levels. Pupils in upper-class private schools also recognize the possible importance of marrying someone from a similar social background—although they may claim they will marry for love, they will probably also list quite stringent characteristics for their partners in terms of educational achievement, future prospects, interests, and so on. While apparently deriding them, most teenagers will

have tried the various "marriage partner" quizzes in the teenage magazines, and they can thus understand a lot of the philosophy that lies behind *omiai* or dating agency arrangements.

I have chosen at random one example of a list, prepared by a 17-year-old boy of above-average intelligence, which is not necessarily typical in any way—there is no such thing as a typical list.

Similar:

- Dating agencies (used by those unable to find a partner for themselves; too busy; too isolated)
- "Girl next door" (approved by parents, sung about in pop songs)
- Can refuse introduced partner

Different:

- Cannot refuse introduced partner (some ethnic minorities in the U.K.)
- Brides from overseas (farmers)

I have quoted this list as it was handed in; in group discussion the general tendency was to see more similarities than differences and, as so often happens, one student pointed out that it depends exactly what you mean by the words being used—often a similar concept exists but is called something different. The limited amount of time which can be spent on this area seems to leave the students with the idea that the *omiai* system has a lot in common with similar systems in, say, the Jewish faith (cf. *Fiddler on the Roof*) and with the more responsible, caring marriage bureau in this country.





Culture and the Foreign Language Class

The learning of any language involves not only a mastery of grammar and pronunciation but also an understanding of the cultural context in which the language is used. This premise underlies all the language teaching undertaken at this school. French and German pupils have contact with native speaker assistants and the chance for at least two exchange visits during their three years of compulsory language learning with further opportunities if they continue with languages in the sixth form. For Japanese we try to provide similar contact with the country where the language is spoken—we do not have an assistant, but we encourage Japanese visitors to come to our classes as often we are able, and most students will meet Japanese visitors at least four times during any one year's course.

In addition, those aged 16 have a chance to spend three weeks in Japan. In advance of that visit, it is of course felt to be crucial to include the cultural input into the language lessons. We try at all times to provide insights into present-day Japanese society and culture, relating both to the overall theme of the language being taught and to the specific pieces of language learnt in any one 200-minute session. Only if they can place the language in context will the students find it possible to master the complexities of this totally foreign language. Both students and

teachers agree that the cultural element of each lesson makes the language live and eventually enables them to communicate more readily with the Japanese people they meet both in the U.K. and, ultimately, in Japan.

Important topics include (in no particular order): a simple geography of Japan; bowing; the seasons and climate; early and modern history summarized; the Japanese family; housing; *uchi/soto*; everyday religion; the workplace—factories and offices; rank and position (the name card); the group ethos; shopping—in the local shops and in a department store; museums and art galleries; the townscape; education—kindergarten to postgraduate; time off—tourism; sightseeing, transport—commuting and long distance; food—cooked at home and eaten in restaurants; sports; music; classical and modern entertainment; special occasions, for example, festivals, weddings; the problems facing Japan today, for example, the aging population, the recession, pollution (waste control), Clause 9, etc.

These topics are not all covered in any one year but are woven into the teaching pattern to fit the language learned where appropriate for the age of the student—in planning cultural input we must always be careful not to present ideas that are too difficult for the students involved to understand correctly or they may form the wrong impression and such cultural input can have a negative effect.

Comments from the Feedback Committee



Educating for Cross-cultural Understanding

There is no doubt that *omiai* fascinates teenagers. Of course, the reasons behind *omiai* need to be well explained or students may come away with completely the wrong idea about marriage and the family unit in Japan. Teachers should be sure to emphasize that an arranged marriage is not someone telling you who you should marry, but introducing you to someone who they feel might be a suitable partner. One or other of the couple can freely say no and end the relationship before it has even begun. And, as mentioned, there are also love matches. The actual dating process and how these love matches come about would make an interesting discussion topic for any teenager.

The idea of laying out brown paper as *tatami* mats is a good one. This would be a good activity to do when discussing housing, as well. Teacher could explain that many single people only live in six mats' worth of space, that for some people, the size of the room seen on the video is all they have to live in.

Language Learning

Applying learned language to a variety of situations is an important skill. One alternative to the *omiai* skit, especially relevant for students who will have the chance to come to Japan as exchange students is:

An exchange student has just arrived at his or her host family's house in Japan. He or she will be staying for a year and attending school. The homeroom teacher for the year comes to the house to meet the student. The low table and

tatami mats can still be used, self-introduction and greetings are still appropriate. The situation is more real to the students than an *omiai* and more likely to actually take place.

Distributing task cards to students, rather than issuing instructions in English, is to be complimented. The idea that as the students' linguistic ability increases, so does the amount of Japanese on the task card is a good one. Although I also imagine that as the students' Japanese improves they are better able to understand the instructions given orally. It must certainly reduce the necessity of using English in the classroom, thus maximizing the use of the target language.

There is no mention of the students practicing the scene in their small groups before performing it in front of the class. It seems to me that by including a few minutes to practice the scene it increases the students' opportunities for speaking in the classroom. The final product would also probably be better as a result. In addition, the evaluation of the students is unclear, although obviously the teacher can evaluate the students as they act out the scene.