



TSUMARANAI MONO DESUGA

—Expressions Accompanying Gift Giving—

U.S. students must understand the Japanese characteristic of modesty to speak authentic Japanese as well as to behave in a culturally acceptable manner with Japanese people. Gift-giving is an ideal example of a situation in which modesty must be explicitly expressed. In this lesson, students' own appreciation of modesty will be activated. Students will learn the scope and importance of modesty in Japanese culture. Students will go beyond "role-playing" to actually "giving" each other gifts using terms and posture appropriate in Japanese culture.



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OBJECTIVES

LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

- To express modesty about a gift that is given

TARGET FUNCTIONS	TARGET EXPRESSIONS	TARGET VOCABULARY
❖ Expressing negative constructions	❖ つまらないものですが、おもしろくないものですが、ちいさいものですが	❖ Words expressing negative characteristics of gifts

CULTURAL OBJECTIVES

- To portray appropriate modesty when giving a gift
- To use appropriate attention to posture and gestures to show modesty

LESSON PLAN

SOURCE MATERIALS

Students bring inexpensive gifts wrapped in *furoshiki*
A transparency with terms used to express modesty when gift-giving

PROCEDURE

1. Activate students' own appreciation of modesty (10 mins.)

1. The teacher begins class by bragging incessantly about what a good teacher she is, and how beautiful she is.
2. The teacher acknowledges that she has been bragging and asks questions, such as "How do you feel when you are with someone who brags?"
3. The teacher reads an example of comments a teenage braggart might make. Students are put into groups for several minutes to discuss how they feel about spending time with people like that.
4. Group responses are shared with the class.

2. Transition from students' culture to Japanese culture (3 mins.)

1. The teacher relates the students' appreciation for modesty to the appreciation for modesty in the Japanese culture.
2. The teacher explains how the scope and importance for modesty in Japan is greater.

3. Introduce gift-giving in Japan (3 mins.)

1. The teacher brings up gift-giving as an example where modesty must be explicitly expressed in Japanese culture.

2. The teacher explains the types of things people say and the types of posture and gestures people use when giving gifts in Japan.
3. The teacher models gift-giving in Japanese culture.

4. Terms for expressing modesty when giving gifts (5 mins.)

1. The teacher provides a transparency with terms such as *つまらないものですが* and *おもしろくないものですが*.
2. The teacher explains the terms.
3. Students practice pronunciation.

5. Realization (20 mins.)

1. A student begins by giving a gift to another student using appropriate language and posture.
2. The student who received the gift then gives a gift to another student.
3. One at a time, each student gives a gift.
4. Each student gives and receives a gift.
5. When all students have a gift, they say *いただきます* and open their gifts, thanking the giver profusely.

6. Reflection (5 mins.)

The teacher leads a discussion about differences and similarities in gift-giving between the two cultures, how the students felt about their new gift-giving experience, and the benefits of the gift-giving protocol to the base culture and the target culture.

7. Evaluation

- ❖ Role-playing

REMARKS

Understanding Culture Through People, Knowing People Through Language

“I will dedicate my life to helping people of different cultures understand one another.” I was a 16-year-old *Amerikajin* (American) seated on tatami in a Kyoto family room when I had the preceding thought which has become my life’s conviction.

What prompted me to come to such a decision at age 16? The answer is surely the sum of my experiences in Japan, though the immediate reason was much more simple. I was watching a Japanese game show on which the guests—all from the United States—were behaving impeccably by U.S. standards but embarrassing me horribly as I judged them by the standards I had assimilated from the Japanese culture. It was tragic to me that people would not see each other as good due to customs—good customs—that seemed ridiculous to the uneducated observer. Though the particular show was of little importance to the world, I considered it a microcosm of the difficulties between people, cultures, nations, and even countries. I wanted to educate people so they could appreciate one another.

I still do. Though my comprehension of the complexities of issues has grown, my reaction to the situation almost twenty years ago is still the driving force of my career and of much of my free time.

As a foreign-language teacher, I wish each

student to have the opportunity to know people from other cultures for many reasons: a second culture offers different ways to do things which might be better ways; a second culture allows us to understand that we have a “culture” that affects our actions; a second culture allows us to interpret all other cultures with an open mind; opportunities for friendships are expanding; and only through personal friendships and cultural understanding can we hope to reach world peace and justice. The only way to understand another culture is through its people; the only way to know people is to speak their language.

The Japanese people, language, and culture have a special place in my heart because they are a part of who I am. Since I spent a year of my formative years in Japan with a Japanese family, I feel that, culturally, I am part Japanese. When I explain my actions to others, many times I have said, “I do it this way/I feel this way because of the time I spent in Japan.” It gives me a great pleasure to be able to share the Japanese culture with students; I get particular satisfaction knowing that the cultural topics, which seem so exotic to them, I interpret not only with understanding but also with sincere affection for Japan—its language, its culture, and its people.

COMMENTS

In Japan, as in other countries, it is appropriate to say different things at different times. A parent giving a child a gift at Christmas time, is unlikely (in either culture) to say “つまらないものですが” (note that the *が* is always included to soften the phrase),” but a secretary might say it to her boss when she bought him a souvenir from her trip, just as we might say “This is just a little something I got in...” This could lead to a discussion about gifts. It is not that people in the West don’t do the same thing, we do. There are occasions when it is appropriate for us to be modest. We will often give gifts to someone and say, “This is just a little something I got in...,” or in response the receiver’s protestations about being given something at all, “Oh, it’s really nothing...” In these phrases we are also being modest, just like the Japanese. We need to be careful as educators that we do not focus on one aspect of a culture and blow it out of proportion, without thinking about how it is reflected in our own society.

包む *TSUTSUMU*

When giving gifts or sending presents, it is customary in Japan to accord special care not only to the contents but to the way a gift is wrapped and the wrapping itself. So, when a Japanese gives someone a present, they may feel taken aback if the recipient tears the package apart without thought for the wrapping, even when they know the person does not mean to be rude. In Japan the polite way to open a present, especially in the presence of the giver, is to undo it carefully, without tearing the paper; and some people neatly fold the paper, saving it for reuse.

Wrapping things is more than a convenience in Japan. It is something to which people give special thought and care.

GIFT-GIVING

The main occasions of gift-giving in Japan are what are known as seasonal greetings, the chief of which are *chūgen* 中元 and *seibo* 歳暮 gifts. *Chūgen* gifts are given in the hot months of summer, mainly July, while *seibo* are winter, year-end presents. Both kinds are sent in order to express gratitude for kindness, help, or consideration the giver has benefited from over the preceding months. It is customary to give such gifts mainly to persons of higher standing, such as one's employer or boss, or the *nakōdo* 仲人 or formal go-between presiding over one's marriage. Once it was common to carry such presents directly to the person at their home, but today the normal pattern is to have them delivered by a department store.

During the *chūgen* and *seibo* seasons, department stores and other shops cancel their usual holidays and hold sales of gifts especially designed for this purpose. While seasonal gift-giving is becoming less common among the younger generations, who tend to think of the practice as empty and old-fashioned, it is still vigorously continued throughout Japan.

For all gifts, including *chūgen* and *seibo*, there are many detailed rules and customs for wrapping. These pertain to the types and patterns of the paper, the direction of the paper's motif, ways of wrapping, use of traditional *mizuhiki* 水引 string or *noshi* のし, many of which have implications for the auspiciousness and message of the gift.

FUROSHIKI

A *furoshiki* is a square of cloth used for wrapping up things, either for storage or carrying. *Furoshiki* come in various sizes, from about 70 centimeters square to larger ones 220 centimeters square (approximately 30 to 90 inches square).

The kanji used to write the word 風呂敷 evoke the urban lifestyle of the Edo period (1603–1867) when people made frequent use of the public bathhouses (*sentō* 銭湯) that were a fixture of every community. People would bundle their towel and washbasin in the *furoshiki* when setting out for the bath, and then use it to wrap up their clothing while in the bath, as well as a kind of bathmat: 風呂 *furo* ("bath") and 敷 *shiki* ("spread").

A *furoshiki* can be used simply by tying the ends together to wrap up things of almost any size and shape. Unlike a briefcase or bag, which has a predetermined form, it is extremely handy and can be folded up after use and used to wrap or carry something else.

The simplicity and flexibility of the *furoshiki* wrapping cloth is similar to that of kimono. Kimono are made in such a way that they will neatly fit the body of the wearer by adjustment of length and breadth using sashes and cords. When taken off, however, a kimono folds up neatly into the simple shape of the original strips of cloth from which it was made.

Since the end of World War II, most people have opted to use modern-style bags, briefcases, and satchels, so *furoshiki* are not seen as commonly as they once were, except at tradition-centered events such as weddings and funerals. *Furoshiki* today are made not only of silk and cotton, but also of synthetic fibers, and are printed with traditional as well as more modern designs.

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