



Colors, *Koi*, and Culture (*Koi-nobori*)

Chieko Jones

International Section
Sydney Japanese School Ltd.
New South Wales, Australia



Ages: 6–7 years old
Level: Beginning
Culture: Meaning of Children's Day
Japanese: Names of colors;
the paper counter...*mai*



Objectives

Throughout Japan each year there are numerous festivals which provide valuable insight into Japanese culture, particularly if the reasons behind those festivals are known and understood. They are ideal for our purposes.

For the purpose of this particular exercise I have chosen a lesson which highlights Children's Day in Japan which, for young students in Australia where there is no equivalent of Children's Day, has proved particularly interesting, enjoyable and, importantly, effective for imparting an important aspect of Japanese culture as well as a message for life in general.

By the beginning of May each year, children in my elementary classes have learned the usual greetings and some basic vocabulary, have been introduced to the counting system, and are ready to learn how to describe the things around them.

In teaching the colors, I selected the *koi* to be a timely focal point for the lesson because it is bright and colorful and offers plenty of scope for student activity as shown in the lesson plan.

Children like bright colors. By connecting a colorful object such as the *koi* to the lesson being taught, the teacher ensures that students enjoy what they are doing and the objective is therefore more readily achievable. At the same time students learn or have the chance to review vocabulary appropriate to this subject and the activities connected with it. Such words are the Japanese equivalents of fish, carp, eye, mouth, tail, body, scales, large/small, strong/weak, wish, bamboo, the counters for pieces of paper, for

months of the year, and of course the colors themselves. Finally their singing of the *Koi-nobori* song—all of these factors contribute to the stimulation of interest in this aspect of Japanese culture.

Cultural understanding is deepened by the knowledge that in Japan *koi-nobori* are flown each year on Children's Day and the reasons behind this use of the *koi*. (There is no equivalent day in Australia so the topic can be repeated at other times of the year if required.) The students receive not only a lesson in the basic colors in Japanese and an understanding of this particular aspect of Japanese culture, but also an important message to carry throughout the whole of their lives: To have the determination, strength and endurance to face and overcome life's difficulties and in so doing to have a stronger chance of success in achieving their lifelong objectives.

Materials

- precut sets of *origami* paper in the same colors as the words to be taught: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, pale blue, purple, gray, brown, gold, silver, white, and black; (Some of these colors have already been learned.) Full-size (175 × 175mm) sheets for class demonstration, smaller cut-down sizes for student use
- white paper to construct a large *koi-nobori* for class demonstration and foolscap size (343 × 432mm or A4 size) for student use, preprinted with the *koi* design
- scissors and glue
- bamboo rods (short, thin garden stakes), one for



- each student
- thread to attach *koi-nobori* to bamboo rod
- if possible, a print of Hokusai's famous "Carp on a Waterfall," or similar art depicting carp battling the rapids, for wall decoration

Procedure

A. Lesson Plan

1. After the usual introductory greetings, teacher shows students a large paper carp (*koi*) and explains that these colorful *koi*, which abound in Japan, fight their way upstream, overcoming such obstacles as rapids, rocks, even waterfalls. Teacher demonstrates this "battle" with a cutout of a *koi* against a simple backdrop drawn on the board showing water, rocks, and waterfall. This type of demonstration is more readily accepted and understood than simply showing a static illustration of the same topic.
Students are told that no matter how many obstacles are in its way, the carp is determined to succeed. Students are also told that Japanese people admire the carp so much for its courage and tenacity that at a special time each year they fly colorful flags made in the shape of the carp. As they flutter in the breeze these flags look like carp making their way through the waters. These flags are known as *koi-nobori* (carp-flags) and the day they are flown is known as Children's Day (May 5th).
Students are asked if they can offer any explanation why these *koi-nobori* are flown on Children's day. If no one answers correctly, the

teacher explains that on this occasion parents are making a wish that their children will grow up with the same qualities exhibited by carp, especially the determination to succeed.

2. Students then proceed to make their own *koi-nobori* using preprinted white paper which, when folded lengthwise, glued along the long side, the tail cut out, and the head slightly rounded, takes on the appearance of a carp. When the body has been completed each student is given a set of pre-cut colored pieces of paper which they first count (*ichi-mai, ni-mai, etc.*) to make sure they have the complete set (in my case, 16 for each side, including the circular piece for the eye, for one side of the *koi*. The other side is completed in the next lesson when review takes place). They then proceed to stick these colored pieces onto the body of the fish matching each color with the *hiragana* that appears on the sheet. These colored pieces of paper represent the scales of the carp.
3. Each of the "scales" is affixed along one edge only so that students will have access to the *hiragana* beneath each color for later reference if needed.
4. When the carp has been completed, it is attached by thread to a small bamboo garden stake (readily available in garden and hardware stores).
5. The teacher then reiterates the Japanese parents' wish that their children will be strong and brave in facing and overcoming life's difficul-

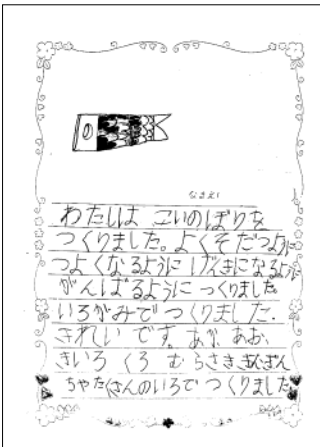


ties, and as a consequence, succeed in life.

- The *koi-nobori* song is introduced and, the students join in.
- As a means of evaluation, children are given a homework assignment in which they are asked to describe (in Japanese) the *koi-nobori* and the meaning behind its use on Children's Day.

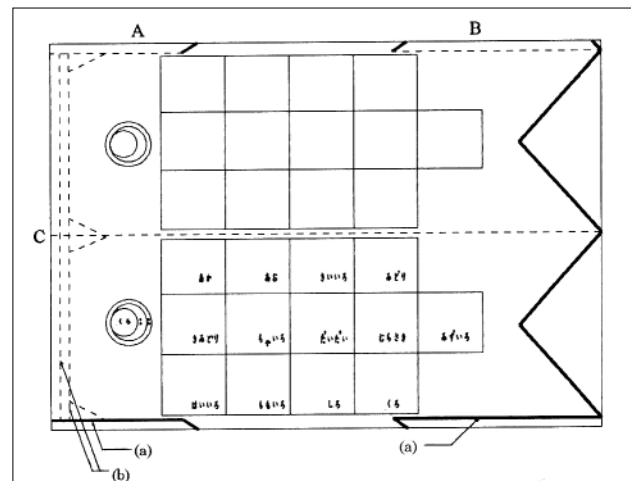
こいのぼり The *Koi-nobori* Song

やねより たかい こいのぼり
 Higher than the rooftop the *koi-nobori* (fly)
 おおきい まごいは おとうさん
 The large black carp is the father
 ちいさい ひごいは こどもたち
 and the small red carp are the children
 おもしろそうに およいでる
 They seem to enjoy swimming (higher in the sky)



B. Template for Simple *Koi* for Student's Color Exercises

Here is a suggested pattern for a *koi*. It is simple to produce on A4, or foolscap, size paper and allows for scales 3 × 3cm. When finished, this *koi* provides a reference point for the students for the names of the colors.



- Cut along heavy lines (a) at bottom of page (not tail) and remove these two lower sections.
- Fold down on dotted line (b), apply glue and affix.
- Fold under at dotted line C (center).
- Cut along heavy lines at top of page. Carefully fold sections A and B downwards in dotted line. Take care NOT to fold center section which becomes the fin.
- Apply glue to the FRONT of sections A and B and the BACK of the fin and affix to other side of fish.
- When glue has set, fold along the dotted line at front of the carp to form the mouth, apply glue then turn inwards.
- Cut along the heavy line at the tail and remove the unwanted pieces.

The *koi* is now ready for its scales, which should be attached with a small line of glue at the left side only so that the *hiragana* names are not obscured.



C. Vocabulary

This list shows some of the key words that are used during this lesson. Because Japanese is the language of instruction (except where difficulties in student comprehension are encountered), there would be opportunities to use words and expressions not shown in the list, for example, *Nani iro desu ka*, *Go-gatsu itsuka*, etc. Students are already familiar with some of these words.

| | |
|---------------|--------------------------------|
| さかな | fish |
| こい | carp |
| こいのぼり | <i>koi-nobori</i> |
| め | eye |
| くち | mouth |
| からだ | body |
| うろこ | scale |
| いろ | color |
| あか | red |
| だいたい (オレンジ) | orange |
| きいろ | yellow |
| みどり | green |
| あお | blue |
| みずいろ | light-blue |
| むらさき | purple |
| はいいろ (ねずみいろ) | gray |
| ももいろ (ピンク) | pink |
| ちゃいろ | brown |
| しろ | white |
| くろ | black |
| きんいろ | gold |
| ぎんいろ | silver |
| きれい | beautiful |
| 1まい, 2まい, 3まい | [counters for pieces of paper] |
| 「~をください」 | please give me ... |
| のり | glue |
| はさみ | scissors |
| きる | to cut |
| おる | to fold |
| はる | to stick |

Every opportunity is taken to introduce, wherever possible, some aspect of Japanese culture into each lesson. This lesson plan concentrates on the meaning behind the use in Japan of *koi-nobori*

but provides other topics for subsequent lessons.

It will be noted that use is made of traditional Japanese words for colors as well as the English equivalents that have been adopted into everyday Japanese. *Momo-iro* 桃色, *daidai(-iro)* だいたい(-色), *nezumi-iro* ねずみ色 or *hai-iro* 灰色, and *cha-iro* 茶色, are used as well as *pinku* ピンク, *orenji (-iro)* オレンジ(-色), *gurē* グレー, and *buraun* ブラウン.

The English adaptations are, of course, taught because of the frequency with which they are now being used in Japan. Nevertheless the traditional Japanese alternatives offer splendid opportunities to demonstrate various aspects of Japanese culture. Let us look at some examples.

1. *Daidai(-iro)* だいたい(-色)

This is a bitter orange grown in Japan. *Daidai-iro* is the color of that fruit when ripe: a deep orange. While the fruit is used in jams, vinegar, etc., it has another intriguing use during New Year celebrations. *Daidai* are featured in the decorations, being used to represent another Japanese word which has the same pronunciation but has a different meaning and is written differently: 代々. This *daidai* has the meaning "from generation to generation" and is the equivalent of the sentiment expressed in the English greeting "(Merry Christmas and) a Prosperous New Year." This is an interesting use by the Japanese of association of ideas through sound.

2. *Momo-iro* 桃色

The color of peach blossoms, pink, is a sight to behold in Japan's springtime. Here we see the association of the word for pink with the object, peach blossoms. In addition to enlarging the students' vocabulary, this provides an opportunity to introduce such topics as *Momo no Sekku* 桃の節句 and *Momotarō* 桃太郎, the well-known folk story.

Momo no Sekku, is the Peach Blossom Festival held annually on the 3rd of March and now popularly known as *Hina Matsuri* ひな祭り, Dolls' Festival or Girls' Festival.



3. *Hai-iro* 灰色

This word for gray is literally the "color of ash." Again we have word association. This provides an opportunity to tell the children a little of the geography of Japan, and of its numerous volcanoes, many of which are still active, belching smoke and ash which is gray in color. If we had used only the word *gurē* グレ – in our lesson, this opportunity would not have presented itself.

4. *Nezumi-iro* ねずみ色

Here is another interesting word for gray. It allows us to associate a color with an animal that features in folklore. Children quickly relate to this one and to the delightful story associated with *Ju-ni-shi* 十二支 telling how the mouse won the animal race.

5. *Cha-iro* 茶色

Brown or, literally, the color of tea. Children learn that tea is deeply rooted in Japanese culture. They are told that tea is widely cultivated in Japan and that various types of tea are consumed nationwide. A feature of Japanese culture is the tea ceremony (*cha no yu* 茶の湯) which was introduced into Japan from China in the Nara period. This provides interesting material for class discussion.

Finishing touches being made to the classroom demonstration *koi*, used for teaching colors to elementary students.

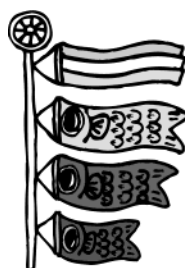


It may be seen that there are advantages in teaching children the traditional Japanese words for the various colors. They are easy to learn because of their association with plants, animals and objects. They serve to expand the students' vocabulary and at the same time they offer opportunities to discuss various aspects of Japanese culture.





Comments from the Feedback Committee



Educating for Cross-cultural Understanding

At the beginning of May, under the clear blue skies in some rural areas in Japan, you can see many, many *koi-nobori* flying in the sky. It is a breathtaking sight! If a teacher can get a video tape which contains one of these scenes and shows it to his/her students, they will immediately understand the reason why parents want to display carps as a symbol of their children's healthy growth. You might want to add some information about the *Hina-matsuri* as well.

One of the advantages of Sydney Japanese School's environment is the mixing of Australian and Japanese students in nonverbal activities during their school day. This system offers a natural and smooth introduction to children from both cultures in a nonthreatening way. Before they even start taking language lessons, they know of the existence of each other, they accept each other, then they learn to appreciate each other. Therefore, international awareness education is already being nurtured, which is vital for any second language learning.

Lesson Plans

While the Japanese educational system stresses a sense of the group, the Australian educational system stresses a sense of the individual. By giving Australian students an opportunity to show

their learning, there could be a combination of both cultures which would benefit them. For example, perhaps the Australian students could present their version of *koi-nobori* to the Japanese students at a joint assembly.

Perhaps a teacher could add some one-to-one communication in class after group work. This time would allow students and teacher to converse in English for better communication about the same topic, while feeding in Japanese terms when appropriate. Questions might include, "What fish or animal would you choose for a flag if you were to start an Australian Children's Day?" "Tell me about your flag." "Would you like to make one for your second project?" The teacher could write down the ideas in simple Japanese phrases for the child to learn. Because of the thinking process, the child's idea on Japanese *koi-nobori*, as well as his or her own flag, become more meaningful, a powerful motivator for learning. Demonstration or presentation of their ideas in simple Japanese to Japanese children could provide children from both cultures an opportunity to show respect for each other.