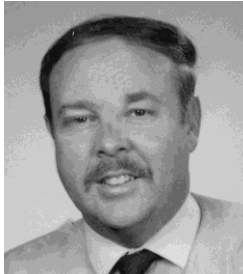




# Using Limited Space Creatively

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**Ages:** 14–17 years old  
**Level:** Beginning–Advanced  
**Culture:** Comparative look at amount and usage of space in Japanese house and the U.S.  
**Japanese:** Vocabulary related to the homes, in conjunction with Lesson 2 in *Yan and the Japanese People*



## Objectives

Space is limited in Japan. This factor has affected many aspects of Japanese life. Through a sequence of activities students will explore how limited space can be used creatively in diverse ways, using and further developing the following skills:

1. Interdisciplinary skills
  - Getting information
  - Evaluating alternative courses of action
  - Participating in group planning and discussion
2. Self-management skills
  - Decreasing egocentric perceptions
  - Increasing the ability to empathize

Since it is a Japanese language class, most students already have an interest in Japanese culture—one which perceives Japanese culture on a very human level. They are not required to study "high culture"—e.g. temple architecture or landscape painting—rather, they experience, through hands-on manipulation of the classroom environment, how Japanese live in their homes.

## Procedure

### A. Background Information and Preliminary Assignments (for instructors use)

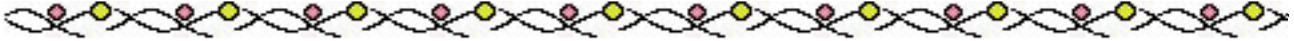
#### 1. Modern Japanese Housing

There has been considerable change in housing patterns in Japan in the twentieth century. Population increase, Western architectural influence, rapid urbanization, and changes in family

and social relationships have all played a role in this process. In Japan's large cities, the majority of people live in multiple-unit dwellings (publicly subsidized apartments (*danchi*), more elaborate *manshon* (from the English "mansion"), more expensive and costly town houses, condominiums, cooperatives, etc.). According to *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Kodansha, 1993), approximately 37 percent of all Japanese households are of these types in 1988. The average total floor space in these urban dwellings is 674 sq. ft. (62 square meters).

Sixty-two percent of all Japanese dwellings are two-story detached houses, most built in the suburbs an hour or more's commute into urban centers like Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. The average total floor area for these *tateuri jūtaku* (developer-built homes) is 1,242 sq. ft. (115 square meters).

There has been a progressive shrinking of the living space available to Japanese middle-class households. At the turn of the century, the average total floor space for such a family was 1076 sq. ft. (100 square meters); by 1988 this had shrunk to 958 sq. ft. (89 square meters). One explanation for this reduction in living space is the bifurcation of Japanese living patterns, with the urban dwellers existing in what are, by American standards, very tiny quarters and the suburbanites trading off commuting time for twice the space in the "bedroom towns" on the fringes of the urban centers. With its tiled roof, walled or hedged ornamental garden, and garage



space for the automobile, the detached house represents something of the ideal home for the majority of Japanese. Inside the house one finds a dining room-kitchen, two or three Japanese-style rooms with *tatami* mats, (each 3 ft. by 6 ft.), and one or two Western-style rooms with carpeted, tiled, or wooden floors. Traditional Japanese homes allowed passage from room to room rather than along a corridor. Rooms were separated by sliding screens and sliding doors (*shōji* and *fusuma*), which allowed for a more flexible multipurposed use of the rooms than is possible in Western houses, in which rooms tend to have fixed functions. The introduction of Western features such as corridors, hinged doors, heavy furniture, toilets, and beds has resulted in Japanese homes being more compartmentalized and private. Still, most also have a traditional Japanese alcove (*tokonoma*), so some of the old features are found even in the newest homes.

Japanese apartments also are rather standardized. Most have a dining room-kitchen ("dining-kitchen"; DK, the letters appear in the windows of Japanese real estate agencies) or, in a somewhat enlarged version, a living room-dining-kitchen (an LDK). In addition, there are two or three "living" rooms and a toilet. These kinds of dwellings are advertised as 2DK, 3DK, or 3LDK. As land and construction costs skyrocketed in the 1980s and early 1990s, developers took to building single-room and 1DK dwellings. In fact, 50 percent of new rental apartments built in Tokyo in 1987 were of this variety.

## 2. Preliminary (Homework) Assignments

As a first assignment, students should measure the living space in their homes or apartments. This gives them some basis for comparison. They should then think in terms of "territoriality": who "owns" what space in their abodes and what rooms are "common territory." If their parents are willing to discuss such matters as mortgage and rents, they should then learn how their homes are financed. This can be done in several ways, but two are recommended: costs over time or cost per square

foot. Students who have lawns (and who might complain about cutting the grass or weeding the garden) should measure them and keep the statistic in mind for comparison with their Japanese counterparts. Next, perhaps with the help of a mathematics teacher, they should learn to convert money, which involves becoming familiar with the financial pages of their newspapers. Finally, they should study their homes to see if there is wasted or dead space and why such underutilized area exists.

What follows are three simple, brief lessons that can be constructed around this preliminary information. The first focuses on affective learning and is designed to build empathetic feelings toward students' Japanese counterparts. The second is more analytical as it is designed to promote cross-cultural knowledge of cost of living expenses. And the third lesson involves values and critical thinking as students prepare to move to Japan and must decide what possessions they should leave behind.

Although not absolutely necessary, teachers are encouraged to bring to class sketches of Japanese homes and apartment buildings (try to find pictures of one-to-three story and more-than-three-story apartment buildings), floor plans, real estate advertisements (for students in the New York Metropolitan Area, comparing ads in Japanese newspapers with those from the Real Estate Section in the *Sunday New York Times* and their local papers is illuminating), and pictures or slides of Japanese dwellings. (If the instructor thinks it can be beneficial in terms of building class compatibility, students can bring photographs of their own homes to show to one another and to compare with the residences of Japanese.)

## B. Lesson One

To introduce students to the idea of organizing materials to fit into a given limited space, ask, "What section of our room seems to have the problem of too much crowded into too small a space?" (Often a storage closet, file cabinet or library area will be



suggested.) Follow that with, "What are some problems caused by the crowding?" (Chart or list areas for later use.) When this is completed, say, "We are going to try to come up with some solutions to the crowding in that area. Let's suggest and list some ways we might deal with the situation by brainstorming." After students are through with their suggestions, have them draw or describe their plan, presenting it to the entire class. If possible, have them actually try to rearrange the room according to their plan.

Japanese have the same problems in their homes that we do in the crowded parts of our classroom, and for the same reasons. Regardless of the economic status of a family and the relative ratio of traditional to Western furnishings, there is less space for appliances and furniture than in U.S. homes. Generally the families have less living space and live closer together than Americans do. An entire house may be smaller than our classroom! Rooms are therefore multipurpose. A daytime living room may have *tatami* floor (thick woven rush mats, 3" x 6") and a low table with cushions for sitting and having tea and meals. At night the table may be tipped on end and moved to accommodate a sleeping pad and *futon* (quilt) from a shelf behind sliding doors.

Having explored the multipurpose nature of the Japanese room, pairs of students will furnish an empty room. Each pair will complete two pictures, one showing the room as a family living room in the daytime, the other in use at night. Before they begin this task, they should list criteria by which the rooms might be judged. They might suggest such things as flexibility, ease of changing from day room to night room. These criteria can be applied as students share their solutions.

During the debriefing, the following points might be discussed:

1. Living space is scarce in Japan. Most of Japan's population is crowded into a few urban areas.
2. What effect might you expect that fact has had on a) the price of housing, b) demand for new housing, c) size of new apartments, d) rental fees, e) availability of apartments, f) furniture manufacturing, and g) people's relationships within the home.

### C. Lesson Two

When land is scarce its cost is high. Some interesting math-related activities might revolve around an estimate of land costs in a suburban area an hour's ride from Tokyo. In 1976, land sold for \$1,700 per *tsubo*, which is approximately 36 square feet. An average lot is approximately 35 *tsubo*, or in 1976 figures, about \$60,000. For 1990, multiply the Japanese land-cost by 8; to get the 1990 dollar equivalent, explain the concept of exchange rates using weight-lifters and barbells, and tell them that in 1976 the rate was 297 yen = 1 dollar. For the exchange rate on the day of the lesson, consult the financial pages of any newspaper.

An alternative to this is to get a *danchi* or low cost public housing apartment in a complex. A 2DK or 3DK (2 or 3 multipurpose rooms, dining area, kitchen and bath) apartment in a private complex cost approximately \$40,000 in 1976. What would it go for today? Brainstorm about whether the cost of an apartment would have gone up eight times, as land costs have, with students giving their reasons for and against.

Lastly, try to measure out in the classroom: 1. a 6-*tatami* room, 2. a *tsubo*, and 3. 30 *tsubo* (30 x 36 sq. ft.) or an average size lot.

### D. Lesson Three

People living in limited spaces have to choose carefully what they need and want. Imagine your family moving to Japan for a year into a 3DK apartment. What problems might you have? Make a list of things each member of your family might need. Add things you feel each would want. What things might you and your family have to leave behind?

Lastly, check the textbook you are using. Compare its data with the Population Reference Bureau's World Population Data Sheet for Japan. Find out the annual percentage increase in Japan's population and the doubling time at the current rate of increase and speculate on the impact of that increase on Japanese housing. In conjunction with that, teach students the Rule of 70: anything increasing at the rate of 1 percent a year will double in



approximately 70 years; at 2 percent, 35 years; at 3 percent, 17.5 years (an argument for saving part of their allowances and earnings!).

#### E. Outside Resources

If available reference books are not up to date, questions on Japan can be answered easily by calling the Japan Information Center, 299 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y., U.S.A. 10017, (212) 371- 8222.

The Department of Asian Studies at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey has recently established an outreach program for New Jersey teachers who need assistance in teaching about East Asia.

Lastly, teachers who are interested in teaching about Japan, China, or Korea in detail are urged to contact the East Asian Curriculum Project at the East Asian Institute, Columbia University, 420 West 118th Street, New York, N.Y., U.S.A. 10027. Among its services are in-service workshops, classroom materials, teaching guides, and consultation on curriculum design, audiovisual aids, textbooks, and travel opportunities.

#### **Culture and the Foreign Language Class**

"Language study is not an end in itself but rather a means to an end. It can unlock the door of another culture faster and easier than any locksmith and keep it open for longer than any doorman."

At the start of each school year since 1977 I have given this quote to my first-year Japanese students as part of my opening lesson on the value of Japanese language study. Often they turn around four years later and include it in the essays they write for their college applications.

Why is it important to introduce Japanese culture? There are as many answers to this question as there are elements of that culture. Forced to narrow my opinion to one reason, I suppose I would have to say that it teaches us to be better human beings. As I write this application, my country is being racked by racial discord. Many of America's students are rude and insensitive. Many of its adults are less than honorable in their personal and business lives. Japan is

not without its faults. But on the most basic of all levels, interpersonal relations, there is much that America can learn from Japan.

The ironic part is that Americans do not have to fly across the Pacific or read books on Japanese etiquette to learn the lessons that Japan can teach. Most Americans need simply to open their eyes to the teachers around them—the Japanese who live (alas, temporarily) in sizable numbers in their own communities. I have often said that Japan's best ambassadors are found not in New York or Washington. Rather, they are located wherever ordinary Japanese citizens live and work. Unfortunately, few Americans count Japanese as friends. The socially distancing practiced here often stems from the two communities living in separate linguistic worlds. If Americans made one-half the effort to communicate in Japanese that Japanese make in learning English, they would be well on the road toward acquiring Japanese sensibilities.

This then is the chief reason for studying the language. And in a small way, for 18 years I have been providing young Americans in Kearny, New Jersey, with the opportunity to improve themselves by acquiring Japanese sensibilities through language study. Many have gone on to continue their study of Japanese values through advanced language learning at some of this nation's (and Japan's) finest universities. All of them are better Americans because of the insight they have acquired from opening the door to Japan.



## Comments from the Feedback Committee

### **Educating for Cross-cultural Understanding**

Everyone in the world has a space for themselves. This class helps students realize that there are many different sets of values and that understanding values different from one's own broadens one's perspective.

By comparing Japan and America through actual numbers, such as land area and the value of a *tsubo* of land, students gain a concrete sense of the differences between the two countries. They also learn that Japanese take an unbelievably small space and use it, because of its very smallness, very creatively. In this way, they learn about another side of the Japanese that they may not have noticed before. The lesson plan thus has students think about a society that is different from their familiar living environment, and step by step, from concrete numbers to a more abstract sense of values, helps students understand and visualize it.

The lesson plan calls for students to put themselves in the position of the Japanese, asking them, "If you were Japanese, how would you use your limited space?" It ties students in with reality and makes them visualize themselves in another country, asking them, "If you moved to Japan, what pieces of furniture in your American house would no longer be useful, and what would be necessary?" The lesson plan eventually gets the student to think of him- or herself as a Japanese and to use the same kind of creativity. The lesson plan, in other words, does not just simply startle the students with novelty—Japanese houses are so small, they sleep on the floor at night—it actually deepens understanding of the values from which such creativity emerges and of what lies behind those values.

### **Lesson Plans**

It has generally avoided stereotypes and instead deals with a topic which is closely intertwined

with culture and language but not usually seen in that light. The content is current, providing students with "now" images of cultural practices which have ancient roots. The design of the lessons is also impressive. There is a great deal of activity, students are examining, measuring, thinking both as individuals and in pairs or small groups. There is an excellent balance of information which the teacher presents, information which students bring from their own experiences or environment, and a synthesis of the two. There is a natural integration of content from different disciplines—math, social studies, art, architecture, and economics—which respects both student learning needs and reflects the world into which these students will be moving. Math, economics, and art are not neatly separated when students graduate from high school or college. Opportunities are provided for comparing and analyzing student findings and observations throughout the process, for example, examination of the classroom for poorly used space, analysis of student living space for use and territoriality, drawings of multiuse rooms, and lists of what can or cannot be moved into a 3DK.

### **Language Learning**

The language goals for this series of lessons are not clearly stated. How much of the information is actually presented in Japanese? What degree of the discussions and class work is conducted in Japanese? The potential seems enormous for both beginning or more advanced groups of students. I can see this class being conducted almost exclusively in Japanese, even in an elementary level classroom, because the nature of the content is such that students would be highly interested, although I would probably ask for student reflections on their cultural and value insights in English.