
Women's Issues

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Ages: 13–18 years old
Level: Beginning–Intermediate
Culture: Images of Japanese women, cultural bias vs. cultural relativism
Japanese: Opportunity to speak with native speakers

Objectives

This lesson compares women's issues in Japan and the United States and helps students to understand the difference between cultural bias and cultural relativism. Cultural bias refers to judging another culture on one's own culture's terms. Cultural relativism refers to perceiving another culture on its own terms.

The students learn from this class that:

- Just as in the United States, there are many kinds of women in Japan; women who are married and happy, married and unhappy, single and happy, single and unhappy, etc. They can't be categorized into just one or two groups
- Understanding a culture requires more than looking at it through the lens of one's own culture; it also requires recognizing those perspectives and values that are specific to that culture
- Videos can provide valuable images and information, but they are highly subjective and generally biased toward the culture of the audiences for which they are made

I chose to do a lesson on women's issues because they are both familiar and important to high school students; they are prevalent in students' daily social lives, and they are frequently discussed in history, social studies, and English classes. Moreover, stereotypes of Japanese women—and people in general—exist among high school students, and there are few opportunities to break those stereotypes down. Finally, it is easy to create an authentic atmosphere in the classroom because I am able to

invite "real, live" Japanese women to come and participate.

For many students, this class serves as a first experience in recognizing the influence of culture on one's own perspectives and values. "Culture," "cultural understanding," "multiculturalism," and related terms are frequently used but not well understood by students, much less by adults. Many people embrace the ideas that "people are people" and that "we are all one," but they tend not to recognize the variety of social norms and values that exist in the world and the fact that not all of those norms and values agree with each other. This class helps students to think about these things.

Procedure

A. Lesson Plan

1. Preparation: homework the night before. Students read Sumiko Iwao's *The Japanese Women: Traditional Image and Changing Reality*, Ch. 1 (Harvard University Press, 1993).
2. Students and visiting Japanese female guests introduce themselves in Japanese. Each person says their name, grade and age (if student), hometown, where they are living now, and hobbies.
3. We review the difference between cultural bias and cultural relativism.



4. I introduce and show the film, *The Story of Noriko* from the *Faces of Japan* series.

5. We discuss the film.

a. Identify the images of Japanese women that the film suggests and discuss whether these images are accurate.

b. Discuss whether the film is an example of cultural bias or cultural relativism.

c. Briefly discuss other films students have seen that exemplify cultural bias and cultural relativism.

6. Students ask visiting Japanese women questions about the film and discuss the chapter in Iwao's book.

7. Students ask open questions about language, gender, culture, and life in Japan compared with life in the United States.

8. Homework. Students write a one-page essay explaining:

a. two things about Japanese women that they did not know before today's class

b. how today's class changed their image of Japan

B. Detailed Explanation of Lesson Plan

1. In Boston, there are many Japanese families as well as university students. I invite three to five Japanese women of different ages to come to the school for this lesson. A few days before the class, I distribute to students and send to visitors an essay entitled "Myths and Realities," the first chapter of *The Japanese Women*.

We begin the class with brief introductions in Japanese. Then, after discussing the meanings of cultural bias and cultural relativism, we all watch the 25-minute film, *The Story of Noriko* from the *Faces of Japan* series.

2. Summary of the Film

Noriko is a young, independent-minded woman living alone in Tokyo and trying to get

a good job. During a holiday, she returns to her rural hometown to visit with her family. Her parents press her to think about marrying soon and ask her to try an *omiai*. Noriko agrees, essentially to demonstrate her loyalty to them, but she doesn't enjoy the arranged "date." She later gets together with an old school friend, a woman of the same age who is married and has a baby. It is worth noting that her friend, a woman whose lifestyle is very different from Noriko's and more typically, traditionally Japanese, is not shown speaking in the film. We, the viewers, only see her holding her baby while her apparently dominant husband urges Noriko to settle down soon. Noriko leaves her hometown eager to get back to the big city, where she is free to do as she pleases. The film has a happy ending, as she finally gets a job that she likes.

3. Discussion: Cultural Bias vs. Cultural Relativism

After watching this film, we discuss it. I ask students what they think of women's lives in Japan, and they predictably say that women seem highly repressed. They say that women like Noriko—women who want to follow their dreams and maintain their individual identities—must struggle to find a comfortable place for themselves in Japanese society. Marriage and home life, many students say, seem like "spiritual jails." Usually, two or three of the visiting Japanese women agree with these ideas, and two or three do not. All of the women, however, are generally eager to express that the film represents the life of one woman and not all women in Japan.

We then discuss how the film itself was made. We consider that videos do not provide objective but rather subjective perspectives on the topics they represent. We talk about who made the film and why Noriko was chosen to be its leading character. We also discuss Noriko's friend and consider why she was only shown holding a baby. I tend to ask questions like, What does that image suggest? What values are being represented? Did she really have

nothing to say? and What might she have said, if given the chance? Students tend to conclude that the makers of the film wanted to portray Noriko as a kind of rare, courageous heroine; a stalwart champion of freedom swimming against the tide of social repression. Her friend is introduced as a silent, subservient homebody as a way of accentuating Noriko's independent, free-minded character.

We revisit the terms cultural bias and cultural relativism, and students determine that the film is biased, judging the condition of women's lives in Japan based on American standards and norms. Visiting women tend to agree that the film neglects to look deeply and openly at the lives of the majority of Japanese women—those who are married with children. They offer that the film does not explain the subtle power and autonomy that most Japanese wives possess—the power, for example to control all household finances and actually set financial allowance levels for their husbands. The visitors provide interesting anecdotes from their own lives and, thereby, fill in important gaps that the film leaves out.



regarded as socially lower than *boku*, signifying inferiority. Each time I run the gender lesson, at least one girl asks the visiting women to explain why girls in Japan can't say *boku* as boys can when they are in situations in which there is no need to express difference.

How do you think the women answer? Actually, the visiting women tend to say that because they grew up in Japan they always accepted and never really questioned the *boku-watashi* norm. To this, students sometimes ask if women in Japan have simply accepted a lower position on the social ladder and if they just don't care about equality.

At this point the interaction becomes delicate but potentially very fruitful. The students are asking about sexual equality, but I think the essential issue is that of freedom: the freedom to choose the way one wants to express oneself. The United States is a young country, and there is a strong sense that people can and should change any aspect of the society in the pursuit of such freedom. Japan is a much older country with many fixed cultural norms that people learn and follow more than challenge. Of course, Japan like all other countries is still evolving, and large-scale social changes have taken place, especially in the latter half of this century. But there certainly aren't any organized movements supporting women's right to say *boku*! Does this imply, as some students have supposed, that Japanese women, and maybe Japanese people in general, are "programmed" with culture and don't possess the passion to pursue freedom when the norms of culture and language restrict it?

The visiting women generally come up with two types of answers to these challenging questions. One type of answer involves descriptions of recent women's rights movements in Japan that speak to a rising concern about social equality and freedom. These, however, do not directly address the issue of *boku* versus *watashi*. Even with the many successful recent efforts to gain rights for women in Japan, the male-dominated linguistic domain remains essentially a non-issue.

The second type of answer brings to students'

C. Open Discussion: Differing Concepts of Freedom

At the end of the period, we have a less-structured discussion about gender issues and language. Students prepare three questions on this topic in advance of the class. The following is an example of one of the more recurring questions.

First, let me provide you with a bit of context. This lesson appears relatively early in the school year. Students by this time have learned the words *boku* and *watashi* and a few things about their use: that girls can only use *watashi* and that boys can use either but generally use *watashi* in situations in which they want to convey a deferential sense of respect to someone older or higher on the social ladder. From this students tend to infer that *watashi* is

attention a deeper level of Japanese culture at which freedom takes a form that is different from that to which they are accustomed. It speaks to the idea that a certain kind of freedom does not achieve expression in the sociopolitical arena. Perhaps because the number of cultural norms in a society that has existed for thousands of years is so enormous, many people in Japan work to achieve what they can within, or beyond, these social boundaries. Again, the example of the household finance-controlling housewife tends to come up.

I mainly try to facilitate and stay out of the interaction between the students and visitors, but at this point I like to offer a couple of anecdotes from my own experiences.

The first has to do with a conversation I had with a high school student about school uniforms. When I began teaching English in a Japanese high school, I was struck by the uniforms, and I asked many students what they thought of them. Predictably, a lot of kids said they hated wearing them, but one student named Teruyo offered a completely different response. She said that she didn't care about them and went on to say that she didn't feel the need to express her freedom through clothing. I remember she said something like, "My thoughts and feelings are inside me, so I don't care about what I wear." Teruyo was in fact one of the most intelligent and opinionated people I knew in that school; we often talked at length about everything from Nintendo to Nietzsche—she was hardly timid or bent into submission, but rather very imaginative and free-thinking.

The second anecdote I like to share has to do with a visit I once made to a friend's tea ceremony lesson. Up to that point I had been to two or three tea ceremonies in Japan, all performed flawlessly by pros. I had always been deeply impressed, but this one had a much more powerful impact on me.

Ironically, my friend wasn't that good at performing the ceremony yet. She trembled as she reached for various utensils and even spilled a few drops as she poured the water into the cups. And while neither

she nor her teacher visibly reacted, those drops falling to the *tatami* felt like glass shattering. At the time I remember wanting to say, "Hey, it's only a cup of tea! Who cares whether her back is straight or whether she spills a drop or two!" And, being a guitarist in a rock band, I smirked to myself as the image of playing an atmosphere-blasting power-chord out of a huge amplifier in that room crossed my mind. Nevertheless, I remained straight and silent, kneeling on the *tatami* and obediently awaiting my tea. Even as a guest, I had rules to follow. I had to sit in a certain place and in a certain way, had to drink the tea in a programmed fashion, and even had to speak at certain times about certain things like where the cup was made and how beautiful it was. With all this to think about, I had no space left in my brain for images of power-chords and amplifiers.

That went on for a while, and then we all said goodbye. I left the teacher's apartment and started walking back to my apartment, a few blocks down on Route 3—the noisy, smelly central artery of Kyushu. As always, trucks were whizzing by and spewing gross smoke and gases; it's a really hideous strip of road that has always bummed me out. On this day, however, I felt strangely impervious to all the noise and stench. I felt as relaxed as a kid

watching Sunday morning cartoons from beneath a large, soft, cozy comforter, and yet I felt as awake and sharp as ever. I thought, "What is this feeling?!" And then, up from my belly bubbled the word, "Free!" "Whoa," I thought. I had perhaps never felt that word so deeply and naturally before, and, ironically, I had come to feel it within a context that was just about as restrictive as any I'd ever encountered. This gave me a whole new view of Japan and what it means to me, and of America, my society, and what's missing there. I thought of

the guitar chord I'd wanted to play in that tearoom, and of the moving and shaking, outwardly expressive kind of freedom that is embraced in the United States. "That's definitely a kind of freedom," I thought, "but there's another kind, or another level,





to which Americans tend not to get much exposure. A deeper freedom that simultaneously exists within and transcends the external restrictions of one's environment." Of course, this kind of freedom is not alien to Americans, just as the fight for political and social rights is not alien to Japanese. However, Japan seems to be one of the wellsprings in the world of this kind of freedom, and I have heard—as I supposed—that the tea ceremony is one of the best places to encounter it.

So, I share these two anecdotes with the students. I try not to spiel for too long in front of them the way I have done in this essay; I try to make it interactive, prompting students to guess a lot and also to offer on-topic examples from their own lives.

By the end of the lesson, I try to establish that, while Japan and the United States are not polar extremes, each country has grown considerably on different fronts—particularly with regard to the idea of human freedom—and that each has much to learn from the other about it. Girls in Japan can't get away with saying *boku*, and in many other linguistic and nonlinguistic ways they are essentially forced to accept a defined and apparently lower place in society. In the future, the political and social status of women in Japan will most likely continue to change for the better, but this does not mean that until then women in Japan are not free. In one sense of the word it does, but in another the restrictions of language, school uniform, etc. are totally *kankei-nai*.

I hope that as a result of this discussion girls and boys in my classes—many of whom struggle for equality and freedom in American society—will consider that people can pursue sociopolitical freedom while along the way maintaining a sense of freedom within themselves that external circumstances cannot touch.

Student Response

Students appreciate the opportunity to interact with Japanese people. Moreover, they enjoy the chance to talk with people who are essentially the subjects of a

reading assignment. This gives them a chance to connect written words with real life and heightens their motivation to learn from reading throughout the course. Furthermore, they enjoy taking in the variety of stimulating images and facts about Japanese culture that the video provides. Finally, I think the take-home message of this lesson is that studying about Japan is not esoteric but actually worthwhile toward understanding and defining one's own, real life.

Culture and the Foreign Language Class

I hated studying foreign language when I was a school kid. It seemed so irrelevant—how could I be concerned with something "foreign" when I was already very busy dealing with the incredible changes I was going through in my daily life! I, like many adolescents going through the slow and awkward transition to adulthood, tended not to care much about things which seemed disconnected from my immediate reality. Unfortunately, my foreign language classes consisted of exercises in memorization of vocabulary and grammar and provided no opportunities for me to take interest in and learn about people in other cultures.

I don't want my students to be bored, as I was in high school. I want them to feel that their study of Japanese is both interesting and meaningful to their lives, that it can help them to look at things that matter to them in new and enriching ways.

Japanese language education has recently boomed in the United States, primarily because people recognize Japan's rising position in the economic world. I want my students to study Japanese not to get rich but to extend their ideas about life and its possibilities beyond the limits of the cultural framework within which they have grown up. Moreover, if American students can identify with a culture and language so different from their own as Japan's, they will be able to appreciate and embrace differences among people in general—rather than fear them.



Comments from the Feedback Committee

Educating for Cross-cultural Understanding

Most scholars must agree with the deep relevance between language and culture, but their perspectives would vary, approaching this relevance as either "culture and language" or "culture in language." I found Mr. Rolbin's teaching plan representative of the culture-and-language perspective.

I found that high school students have a strong awareness of gender issues in daily life in the States. I was pleased to learn of the students' reaction to gender issues in Mr. Rolbin's class. He connects his students' interest in daily issues and intercultural communication ideas very well. Students are encouraged to cultivate thinking from the multiple perspectives presented. In addition, they develop an awareness of intercultural communication issues, not only in foreign language settings but also within American society as a multicultural society.

Unlike other European languages, Japanese is far from English with respect to grammatical structure, writing systems, sociolinguistic aspects, and so on. Some instructors of Japanese tend to emphasize these differences with stereotypical images of Japanese language/culture. The stereotypical image of Japanese seems too pervasive and too rigid to allow a look at various aspects of Japanese language and culture. In contrast to this tendency, Mr. Rolbin has utilized the stereotypical image of Japanese women to help students to understand intercultural communication problems, namely cultural bias and cultural relativism.

Through a comparison of the film *The Life of Noriko* and the actual interaction with Japanese women, students get firsthand knowledge with which they can think the issue through for themselves.

Language Learning

My concern with Mr. Rolbin's lesson is the nature of the language component. The plan does not provide much detail about the actual language taught or used during the lesson, so I am curious as to just how fluently students could ask questions and express opinions during the discussions with the visiting Japanese women, as well as to what expectations Mr. Rolbin had of their performances.

It is the balance between content and language teaching which makes content-based language instruction really work. Pesola and Curtain provide an excellent planning tool in their book *Language and Children: Making the Match* (Longman, 1995). Their grid allows a teacher to analyze content-based lessons for the vocabulary, language forms, language functions, cultural aspects, and content goals. The teacher can then make informed decisions about which vocabulary needs to be both receptive and expressive; which needs only be receptive; which grammatical forms need to be introduced in order to understand and express that understanding of the content material; which language functions students need to have command of for this particular lesson; and which cultural aspects come into play or might be highlighted by this lesson.

For example, in Mr. Rolbin's lesson on Women's Issues and in preparation for the discussion with resident Japanese women, the appropriate level of politeness, question forms and requests for clarification of meaning could be included in the language functions to be taught, along with the obvious vocabulary which students need for this subject area. The use of this grid provides the teacher with a record of the language functions, forms, vocabulary, and, in the case of Japanese, the *kanji* to be taught and the level of mastery expected.