Tips for Teachers

Talking About Our Own Culture

Kiyoko Tano, Hakuoh University Senior High School, Japan

Many Japanese high school students take courses with titles like Intercultural Communication or Understanding Cultures. These courses are designed to improve students' spoken English skills and knowledge of the wider world, particularly the English-speaking world. Most Japanese students are interested in the topic of culture and enjoy learning about other countries. However, they are frequently unable to answer questions about Japanese history or culture when asked by foreign teachers, visitors, or host families. There are at least two reasons for this. One is generally weak vocabulary and oral fluency skills in English. The other is that students often lack background knowledge about historical events or customs in Japan. The activity described below has helped me address these weaknesses in my students. Perhaps it could be helpful for other teachers who wish to encourage their students to examine and talk about their own country or culture.

The incentive for designing this activity came from realizing that the textbook for my class was too difficult for my students. Although the book was inappropriate, I still want to use some sort of text to introduce a topic and the language that will help my students discuss it. I look for appropriate passages in the textbook collection in the teachers' library of my school. I choose relatively short and easy passages of about 20-30 lines on interesting topics relevant to the cultural theme of the course. Then I follow these steps.

Step 1: Building Background Knowledge and Vocabulary

First, we read and discuss a passage to make sure that everyone understands the topic. Students particularly enjoy passages that focus on customs that are different from Japan, such as superstitions, gestures and body language, and table manners and other rules of behavior. We also examine the passage for words, phrases, and common expressions that will help us describe Japanese customs.

Step 2: Thinking About Our Own Culture

After the reading, we think about how this cultural topic or custom is similar or different in Japan.

Step 3: Modeling What to Say

I give one or two examples to help them get started. This example shows how to explain or illustrate a superstition.

> I thought of three Japanese superstitions. One is about the number 4. In Japan, number 4 is bad luck because one word for 4 sounds like another word that means "death." As a result, some Japanese hotels do not have room numbers with 4.

This example focuses on a useful sentence pattern that students could use to talk about superstitions—the if . . . then . . . construction.

> I thought of ____ (how many) Japanese superstitions. The first one is about ____. Japanese people think that if ____, then ____. The second one is about ____. We think that if ____, then ____.

Step 4: Gathering Ideas

I frequently use an activity like Figure 1 to help students plan and practice what they want to say. Some students find it easier to begin thinking with pictures. Others prefer to begin with words. While they are working, I help them with vocabulary and phrasing.

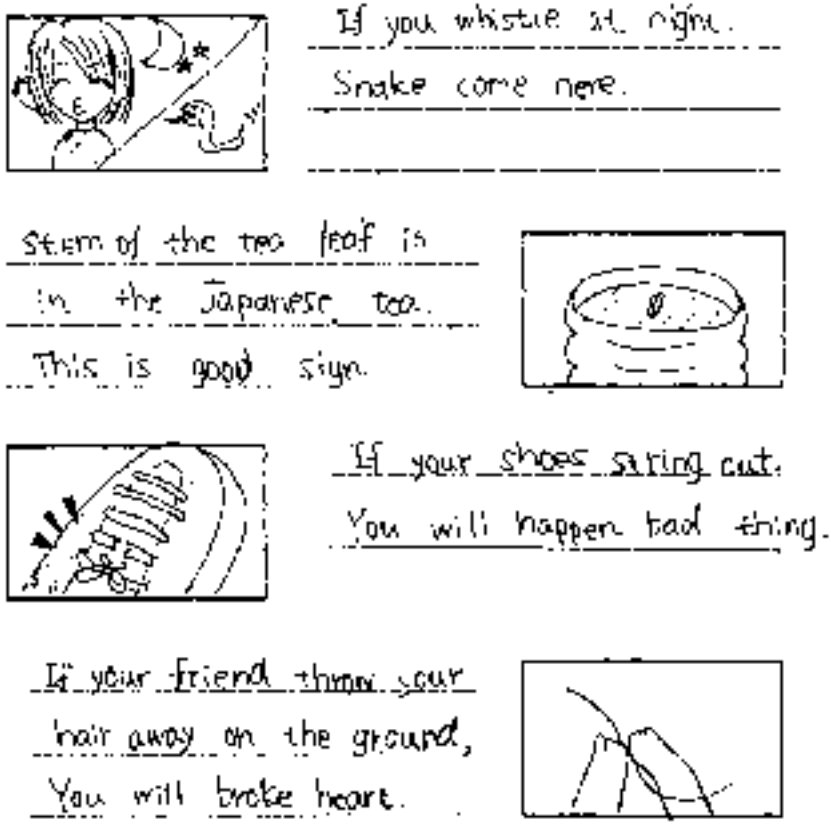
Figure 1: Sample Student Activity

Let's talk about Japanese superstitions

> According to our article, in some cultures . . .
>
> if you break a mirror, you will have bad luck.
> if you feel an itch, someone may be talking about you.

These beliefs or habits are called *superstitions*. Can you think of some Japanese superstitions? Draw pictures and write a few words to tell about some Japanese superstitions.

Figure 1: Sample Student Activity (*continued*)



Step 5: Preparing to Speak

Next, I give students a few minutes to practice explaining their ideas aloud. While they are practicing, I help with pronunciation, intonation, and stress.

Step 6: Talking to Each Other

Now, students are ready to talk to each other. Although there are many good ways to arrange this, I often have students work in pairs. Then, after a few minutes, alternate rows of students must move so that everyone has a new partner. When they repeat their "stories" with a new partner, they are typically able to do so with less reliance on the script. We repeat the shifting rows move until each person has had 3-4 partners. Each

repetition helps build fluency and confidence. Sometimes, students take turns telling one of their ideas to the whole class.

Conclusion

My students enjoy activities like these. Sometimes they disagree with each other. Sometimes they learn something about Japan that they did not know before. One possible follow-up activity is to save the student papers, collect, and bind them into booklets that they and future students can read.

About the Author

Kiyoko Tano teaches at the Tomita campus of Hakuoh University Senior High School in Tochigi Prefecture, Japan. She is a graduate of Japan Women's University. She describes herself as an English teacher who is still learning English but loves helping students feel the sense of accomplishment that comes from doing well.