

## 新たな試み：Tackling Japanese culture in the Rikkyo English classroom

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The Japanese Studies through English or JSTE class of the English Minor Program is an elective subject that would, no doubt, hold appeal for instructors who studied or have been involved in Japan-related studies. Having specialized in Japanese language and culture for my graduate studies and having also spent years in Japanese language education, I had looked forward to the prospect of teaching JSTE. It was this year, my fourth year of teaching at Rikkyo, that I had finally been given the opportunity to handle the class.

It was not my first time to teach a Japanese culture class, but it would be the first time for me to teach the subject in English to Japanese students. I have taught Japanese culture classes in Manila to Filipino university students and in Osaka to *ryuugakusei* with a mix of nationalities from countries such as the US, Finland, Taiwan, and Korea.

Typically, for programs aimed at international students, the approach to teaching Japanese culture is either in the form of cultural activities such as homestay, field trips, and demonstrations for tea ceremony, kimono-wearing, and calligraphy; or lecture-type classes where international students can study about issues in Japan with lessons delving into history, economics, politics, and popular culture.

It would seem unlikely that there are such classes meant for Japanese university students but the objectives of the JSTE class, in fact, run along similar lines, i.e. to be able to develop students' knowledge of Japanese culture, and to deepen their understanding of Japanese issues. The distinguishing feature of JSTE class is that it is Japanese students studying their own culture and examining it critically from their perspective as natives using English to communicate their ideas. A class which studies a country's culture, after all, is not necessarily just for foreign students. Such a class also does not merely present or introduce the outward manifestations of culture (e.g. food, clothing, music, and celebrations) but makes students aware of the cultural significance of these elements and understand the abstract concepts behind them.

## 授業の背景 : An overview of the JSTE class

### *Class goals and description*

JSTE is an elective course under the English Minor Program offered once a year in the spring semester. As mentioned earlier, its main objectives are to broaden students' knowledge of Japan and further cultivate their understanding of the culture as they learn to communicate their ideas and views in English. Students will be able to critically think and examine perceptions about Japan and as they compare their opinions, responses, and personal experiences with each other, they could gain new perspectives and insight into the culture. In the process, they also brush up their English skills as with other Minor Program classes.

JSTE is one of the classes that attract a good number and a good variety of students. The class I handled was composed mostly of sophomores and juniors, while there were a handful of freshmen and seniors, plus one *ryuugakusei* from the United States. Incidentally, among the regular students, there were two non-Japanese, from Macau and Taiwan, respectively.

### *Class content*

With such a big and mixed class, it would be difficult to cater to students' individual needs and to be able to consistently monitor their work and progress. To assure that my JSTE students could interact and have ample opportunity to engage in discussion and share ideas, I opted for three main activities that they needed to accomplish in groups: oral reports, small-group discussion and feedback essay<sup>1</sup>, and a final project.

*Oral reports.* After the students were divided into groups, they were made to choose what they found interesting among the concepts that illustrate Japanese culture listed in the textbook. They then worked together and prepare for an oral group report introducing and explaining the concepts, making use of a PowerPoint slide presentation. I encouraged them to research further and provide examples of situations or real-life experiences that show how the concepts exemplify Japanese culture and to relate them to cross-cultural issues such as making comparisons with similar concepts in other cultures.

*Small-group discussion and feedback essay.* The small-group discussion follows every presentation with the class breaking into smaller groups of about three members. The group in charge of the presentation gives out two

sets of questions on the topic taken from the textbook (one part focusing on Japanese culture and the other on cross-cultural issues). Members of the discussion group answer these questions and share their responses with each other. All students have to take notes during the discussion. They will then use these to write their feedback, comments, and reactions to what was discussed in an essay of about 200-250 words which they do as homework and submit the following week.

*Final project.* In place of a final exam, I asked my students to devise an original material as a final project by preparing a guide on Japanese culture in the form of a pamphlet. They would create it as though it was meant for international students who are visiting Japan for the first time. They are free to be as creative as they wanted in producing the pamphlet provided it had a mix of text and images and sufficiently introduced Japanese culture — either highlighting its uniqueness and distinct qualities — or giving useful information about daily living to help international students. The project would be graded for its content, or its writing and visual quality in terms of informativeness and relevance, and for originality and creativity.

## 授業の実施：Some thoughts and observations

One major realization I had while preparing for the class before the



Assorted examples of students' pamphlets introducing Japanese culture



with different answers including characteristics and descriptions (e.g. kawaii, otaku, shy, avoids conflict, stressed, does not say opinion); abstract ideas (e.g. wabi-sabi, omotenashi, keigo, jouge kankei); people or place names (Kyoto, Asakusa, Mt Fuji, AKB48, Kyary Pamyu-Pamyu); and objects (washoku, sakura, kotatsu, jinja, momiji). It was an encouraging and promising sign and to me, it reflected their keen interest in Japanese culture.

The students displayed the same enthusiasm in their participation in discussions, showing eagerness in comparing cultural experiences. I thought that they might not be used to scrutinize aspects of their daily life or question practices, traditions, and values, or might not be comfortable talking openly about personal experiences. Yet once they had settled in smaller groups, I was surprised to note that they were quite honest and not as self-conscious in answering the Japanese culture and cross-cultural questions. Even if they found themselves with different members of the class in each discussion, the students remained candid in sharing anecdotes and observations. For the entire semester, we managed to have smooth and lively exchanges in class.

The non-Japanese students were especially sought out for their reaction and response to cross-cultural issues brought up in discussion. The American exchange student had not yet stayed in Japan long enough compared to the students from Taiwan and Macau, so given the differences in their exposure to the Japanese way of life and in their language proficiency, they offered their classmates contrasting views of Japanese culture. The Japanese students were very curious about how their non-Japanese classmates thought of the cultural differences between Japan and their countries and were proactive in posing questions to the three students. Again, these scenarios demonstrate a generally positive attitude students had toward the subject throughout the semester.

For variety in between the group report presentations and discussions, I introduced other activities and topics not included in the textbook. For example, we took up the theme of *hyoujungo* (standard Japanese) and I had students discuss points like the differences between dialects and *hyoujungo* and whether it was good for foreigners studying Japanese to learn *hyoujungo* first before learning a dialect. The class also had a few video-viewing activities. A video that especially generated interest among my students featured an American and a Filipino who were introducing the subculture of Akihabara. I was surprised when some female students said it their first time to know about Akihabara. Although they were aware of the existence of otaku culture,

they had never been to Akihabara and had no idea that it was a popular destination for foreign tourists, so they found the video quite educational.

The final project turned out to be a particularly effective activity that also received good feedback from the students. The themes that students picked for their guides were varied and practical and included both traditional and modern elements. For example, there was a step-by-step guide giving advice on student life and another on homestay or visiting a Japanese home. There was also a guide to convenience stores offering tips on what kinds of useful products are sold. Other projects introduced characteristic examples of Japanese culture such as an explanation of Japanese-style New Year celebrations and shrines and temples, and introductions to fashion trends and manga and animation.

The students' pamphlets were mostly handmade but in spite of the low tech approach, they were creatively presented and well thought-out. When I was first giving the guidelines for the final project, I had considered asking students to create a webpage instead of a pamphlet but thought that not all students could be expected to be tech-savvy. I also decided that the latter would inspire better teamwork as it involves careful planning and could encourage more creativity. A few students expressed uncertainty about accomplishing the assignment but when they finally submitted their work, they said they were inspired to do the project. They also commented that it would have been enjoyable to hold a presentation of all the projects to see the pamphlets created by the other groups. It was unfortunate there was not enough time to have them look over each other's work.

## これまでの学んだこと : Enlightenment and effort

Teaching the JSTE class was a novel and exciting experience for me primarily because it is a rare opportunity that combines two subjects that I am personally interested in teaching: the English language and Japanese culture. I expected it would be unlike my previous experience with non-Japanese students who had minimal understanding and exposure to Japanese culture.

At first, having Japanese students seemed like a daunting challenge with factors such as class size and differences in backgrounds, and considering that, as natives, they have firsthand personal knowledge of their culture. Yet contrary to my expectations, the class worked out well on so many levels sustained by the students' enthusiasm and natural curiosity and their

feedback shows how their views of Japanese culture have been transformed at the end of the semester.

Several students commented that they had never consciously thought of Japanese culture before and acknowledged that participation in the class sparked an interest to rediscover their culture and heritage. It had given them an opportunity to have a fresh view of cultural elements which they encounter in their daily life that they take for granted. Some students said they realized a need to appreciate their culture and take pride in their identity as Japanese especially after seeing the favorable impression and strong appeal that Japanese culture has abroad.

I am happy that through the class, students could examine different perceptions and interpretations of Japanese culture and that they were enlightened about concepts of the culture which they achieved through discussions and by reflecting on their cultural experiences. With the trends in globalization in Japanese education and in society in general, and in the light of the upcoming Tokyo Olympics in 2020, it is vital that students, especially those who will be interacting with different nationalities from around the world, possess substantial knowledge and clear understanding of Japanese culture. Moreover, they should also be encouraged to make an effort to build their confidence in English in sharing, explaining, and making known their culture to people from other cultures. Hopefully through classes such as JSTE, our students at Rikkyo realize they have a venue to jump-start their effort.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 I decided to adopt the textbook, *The Japanese Mind* (Roger Davies and Osamu Ikeno, eds) to serve as basis for these activities. This textbook is a collection of essays in English actually written by Japanese students at a public university and developed into a classroom reading material. The essays contain about 30 different concepts in Japanese such as *omotenashi*, *matsuri nemawashi*, *amakudari*, *giri*, and *honne* to *tatema*, explained by the students based on their research.
- 2 The presentation, "Teaching Culture in an Integrated Assessment Context" was delivered by Kevin Watson of the University of the Ryukyus at the JALT conference in Kobe in October 2012.

# Syllabus

## 授業の目標

## Course Objectives

This course presents an opportunity to develop students' knowledge of Japan and for them to learn and communicate in English their ideas and views covering topics such as history, geography, politics, economics, religion, traditional and contemporary culture, and language. The class will enable students to deepen their understanding of Japanese issues while honing their English skills through readings, discussions, lectures, and presentations.

## 授業の内容

## Course Contents

The course allows students to critically consider their views about Japan and examine their awareness and experiences that will help them gain new perspectives and insight into the culture. Students are required to read any assigned text and additional material on a chosen topic, do research as necessary, and be able to share and present information they gathered. It is expected that students will be able to engage in discussion on the topic, as a leader or participant, and also to make a presentation.

Students are encouraged to maintain a reflective and inquisitive attitude toward their study, making observations, building vocabulary, and taking notes as they will be asked to submit reaction papers or response essays.

## 授業計画

## Course Schedule

1. Orientation and Introduction to the Course
2. Uchi to Soto: Human relations
3. Sempai-Kouhai: A seniority system
4. Danjo kankei/Omiai: Male and female relationships
5. Honne to Tatemaie: Public vs private
6. Aimai: A sense of ambiguity
7. Haragei/Chinmoku: Ways of Communication
8. Hyoujungo: Standard language and dialects
9. Gambari: Patience and determination
10. Iitoko-dori: Elements of Foreign Culture
11. Otaku: Popular culture
12. Individual consultations/Preparation for the Final Presentation
13. Final Presentations (I)
14. Final Presentations (II)