

## **Japanese Ominous Cultural Encounters**

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This paper looks at four ways to convey cross-cultural information in typically the academic context. First, an overview presents these four common approaches, which are the multicultural, the monocultural, the bicultural, and the experiential approach. The main part of this paper then demonstrates the experiential approach with most of its citations referring to the Japanese culture. This exercise builds the learners' personal involvement by forcing them to decide on a response to each cross-cultural encounter. Learners make choices by bringing to bear the totality of their background knowledge, their personal experiences, and their powers of intuition.

In E. T. Hall's (1981a; 1981b; 1982) pioneering work, that eventually evolved into the field of intercultural communications, he identified and explained cultural behavioral patterns, beliefs, values, attitudes and certain innate notions related to time, space, and silence. Hall's literary style may be considered a multicultural approach since he collected examples from several, autonomous culture groups and even from ethnic groups within the United States to elucidate the cultural elements under examination. In the same vein, Stewart and Bennet (1991) categorized mainstream American values by comparing thoughts and actions to those present or absent in other culture groups. Some authors (Naotsuka & Sakamoto, 1981; Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982) identified problematic communication patterns, when in contact with Japanese, by polling various foreign residents in Japan.

Academic courses titled 'Intercultural Communication Studies' or 'Cross-Cultural Communication Studies' often follow this multicultural approach. Textbooks are now likely to compare components of culture, across various cultures, by citing numerous, supporting research studies and by including exhaustive reference lists (Martin & Nakagawa, 2000). Formerly, such courses contained selected readings about peculiar situations that were gathered from random cultures. So, students first scrutinized those readings for cultural differences and then compared them to what occurs in their own, native-English speaking culture (Samovar & Porter, 1982; Condon & Yousef, 1985). Unlike the current learning material, Hall's (1981a; 1981b; 1982) work often mentioned real world examples or he included personal anecdotes. In this way, the content was both informative and captivated the readers' interest, as well.

In the monocultural approach, learners gain knowledge about the target culture by having specific culture points individually examined. These textbooks point out themes or aspects of that culture, often over generalized assumptions, which usually distinguish it from most other cultures (Lebra & Lebra, 1974; Nakane, 1973). Or a book may focus on one field of study, such as, interpersonal communications (Neustupny, 1987) or on business strategy (Hall & Hall, 1987; March, 1988). Upper division course work or other specialized materials may include more illustrations, tables, or statistics, along with a full reference list (Sugimoto, 2003). Books intended for the mass market, often written by authors with extensive, personal experience within that culture, such as a journalist (Christopher, 1984) or a long-term resident (Taylor, 1983), should not be

dismissed out of hand since the authors' comments or anecdotes often enliven the readings along with adding more depth of knowledge into that target culture.

Some books or articles clearly contrast cultural differences between two cultures, thus applying the bicultural approach. In this simplistic, and normally stereotypical approach, authors specify conflicting behaviors or communication styles (Akasu & Asao, 1993). Some authors shroud this contrastive technique in an obscure title while for others their lucid title clearly indicates this methodological approach (Condon, 1984; Kurokawa, 1987). As a supplement to a foreign language course, the bicultural 'culture capsule' approach is effective in teaching major lifestyle or linguistic differences while simultaneously motivating students to pursue further foreign language study. When specifying a key element, the authors succinctly capture the essence of that custom or communication style in a short reading, often written with two, contrastive columns displayed on one page. Comprehension may be further heightened with visual information such as photographs or illustrations that highlight the key point (Miller & Loiseau, 1979).

The fourth approach under examination is often referred to as an experiential approach since each reading text describes an encounter or situation from which learners choose a single, correct response from among the four that are provided (Ford, Silverman, & Haines, 1983). In these defined encounters, where one's native beliefs and values<sup>1</sup> could be challenged, learners may experience shock, disbelief, or puzzlement when they find out what the correct key response is. The right answer is clearly explained in the key solution section along with why the remaining three distractors were unacceptable responses. These encounters may be designed to illuminate a wide range of culture points from readily observable actions to ingrained thoughts and behavioral patterns that are acquired through the normal socialization processes in one's native community.

This paper depicts eight encounters using the experiential approach to acquiring cultural knowledge, refer to Japanese Cultural Encounters below. These encounters are taken from Japanese culture in an attempt to inform non-Japanese about some actions that Japanese citizens perform to bring about good luck or to dispel bad luck. Readers first study the defined situation or encounter with its four possible responses. Then, they choose one response that explains the proper action to take or not to take. Readers then confirm their selected response by reading the Key Solution Section which follows the Japanese Cultural Encounters. These eight situations, plus the key solution section, provide practical information which aids foreigners in getting along better with Japanese in certain contexts as well as demonstrating the experiential approach to teaching and learning about foreign cultures.

### Japanese Cultural Encounters

#### 1. Hide your thumbs!

You have been posted to Japan to promote the business of the American company you work for. You try to learn about Japanese culture and to fit in. One day, while you are walking along a street you see a hearse drive by. At the same time, you see two boys put each thumb into each palm and then close each hand to make a fist. What is the reason for this gesture?

(A) the boys imitate the driving away of a restless spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Condon & Yousef (1985, p. 51) provide compact definitions for beliefs (i.e., statements about what is true and false) and for values (i.e., what is judged good or bad, right or wrong, describing the ideal, the standards by which behavior is evaluated).

- (B) the boys try to protect their parents from harm
- (C) the boys imitate holding two bones after cremation
- (D) the boys wish the deceased person a smooth journey to the other side

## 2. Souvenirs at the Shrine

After you arrive in Japan, you go to a Shinto shrine and notice various things to do or to buy there. You want to take some souvenirs back to your apartment. Which thing should NOT be removed from the shrine grounds since doing so would signal an omen of bad luck?

- (A) the arrow (hamaya)
- (B) the talisman for academic success (kyoiku omamori)
- (C) the worst possible fortune slip (daikyo fortune slip)
- (D) house-shaped, wooden votive tablet (ema)

## 3. Ritualized Gift Giving

As an American salesman in Japan, you want to conform to local customs and to send out appropriate *oseibo* (year end) and *ochugen* (summer) presents to your customers. Which of the presents would NOT be suitable to give to your Japanese customers.

- (A) a set of four, attractive, tea cups (for Japanese style tea)
- (B) a box of a popular, fresh fruit from a noted area in Japan
- (C) a box with a variety of premium, roasted coffee beans
- (D) a book of shopping coupons that can be negotiated at any department store

## 4. Gifts for a Hospitalized Person

One of your middle-aged Japanese male buyers has been hospitalized and he is expected to be there for 10 days. You are now shopping for an appropriate gift. Which gift would NOT be a proper gift for a hospitalized person?

- (A) A bouquet of red and white roses
- (B) a box of good-quality chocolates
- (C) a small, potted house plant
- (D) a modern, attractive wall clock

## 5. Hospital Room Numbers

You are on your way to visit a Japanese male colleague in his hospital room. You remember the room is on floor 7 but you forgot the exact room number. Which room number would be the LEAST likely that he would be in?

- (A) Room 741
- (B) Room 745
- (C) Room 747
- (D) Room 749

## 6. Sleeping Direction

You are left alone in the hospital room with your Japanese colleague as the patient. He complains about the bright sunshine and he asks you to change the direction of his movable bed. Which direction would you NOT point the head of the bed in?

- (A) east
- (B) west
- (C) north
- (D) south

## 7. Nighttime Behavior

You happen to be left alone at night in the hospital room of your Japanese colleague while he undergoes some additional examinations. After a while you become bored. What ominous behavior should you NOT do while you wait for him to return?

- (A) trim your fingernails with a fingernail cutter
- (B) hum a tune, but not loud enough to bother others
- (C) scratch your head so that dandruff falls out
- (D) listen to classical music on the portable radio

#### 8. Hospital Discharge Date

Your Japanese male colleague has successfully undergone a medical operation. The doctor talks with him about his discharge date from the hospital. Which day would be the LEAST appealing for your colleague to check out of the hospital on? (February 2004)

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|---|-------|--------------|
| (A) Thursday, February the 12 <sup>th</sup> | (212) | (butsumetsu) |
| (B) Friday, February the 13 <sup>th</sup>   | (213) | (taian)      |
| (C) Saturday, February the 14 <sup>th</sup> | (214) | (shakku)     |
| (D) Sunday, February the 15 <sup>th</sup>   | (215) | (sensho)     |

### Key Solution Section

#### 1. Hide your thumbs!

If you chose answers (A) (C) or (D), you used your logic to associate the deceased person in the hearse and the boys' actions. But (B) is the correct answer (Japan-guide.com, 2006). The naming of thumbs in Japanese is *oyayubi*, *yubi* being a counter for fingers or toes. *Oya* in standard Japanese means *parents*.

#### 2. Souvenirs at the Shrine

Many of the things for sale at the shrine are intended to be taken along. The arrow (hamaya) is to be placed in the home, the various forms of talisman (amamori) for protection or help go with you, as are all of the fortune slips, except the lowest level or worst one (daikyo) which is tied to a branch on the shrine grounds to be burned later. The votive tablets (ema) remain on public display on the grounds. So answer (C) is the correct answer.

#### 3. Ritualized Gift Giving

Biannual gift giving often takes place between colleagues, business contacts, and even relatives. Since the great stock market and real estate crash in the early 1990s, gifts have become more practical and more useful. These are often items to be used or consumed on a daily basis. All of the possible answers are likely gifts. Even though answer (A) is a fitting gift, the number of the sets, four, is the problem (Japan-guide.com, 2006). Japanese seldom give things totaling four because the numeral *four* may be pronounced either like *yong* or *shi*. *Shi* is a homophone for *death* in Japanese. Giving sets of three or five items overcomes this linguistic hurdle.

#### 4. Gifts for a Hospitalized Person

Answer (D), the wall clock, is an unlikely gift for a hospitalized person but it carries no particular cultural stigma. The box of chocolates (B), or possible cookies

(biscuits), would be a practical, easy choice. A bouquet (A) is a common gift but red and white roses signal happiness so visitors must consider both the proper kind of flower and the color when making a selection.. The nursing staff often objects to cut flowers because of the problems of spillage or the extra care that must be taken with them. Selection (D) is the unfavorable choice since these plants are rooted into the soil which symbolizes permanency or a long stay.

#### 5. Hospital Room Numbers

As mentioned earlier in situation 3, the number four is avoided in many situations (Japan-guide.com, 2006). Certain combinations of numbers are also avoided, especially at hospitals. (D) would be the least likely number since 49 can be pronounced as *shi kyu*, meaning *death* and *pain*.

#### 6. Sleeping Direction

This example takes place in a hospital but the direction of sleeping even holds true in family residences or while camping. The only possible choice is (C) north since only dead people are laid with their heads directed toward the north (Japan-guide.com, 2006).

#### 7. Nighttime Behavior

No particular negative association is connected with either answers (C) or (D). Answer (B) is wrong to do at night since it summons snakes which are inauspicious at night. Answer (A) would be unthinkable to do (Japan-guide.com, 2006), especially in a hospital since this action is associated with preparing dead people for viewing at the wake. People who do this will not be nearby when their parents die.

#### 8. Hospital Discharge Date

Although (B) is commonly known among young Japanese, probably from various horror movies about Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, this would be an imported superstition and not widely followed. Hospital staff could easily process out patients on weekends (C) or (D). The solution to this problem is the name of the day of the week, taken from the six-day, lunar calendar. The *taian* days are the most favorable days while *butsumetsu* days are inauspicious (A) (Hira, Fukui, Endoh, Rahman, & Maekawa, 1998). Some middle-aged or older Japanese may defer important actions on *butsumetsu* days or plan a ceremony for a *taian* day.

### Conclusion

This paper includes a summary of four common approaches to teaching or learning about other cultures with an emphasis on the experiential approach. The multicultural approach often cites examples from autonomous cultures, subcultures or ethnic groups, to support specific concepts or behaviors that people should be made aware of, especially when communicating across cultures.

Educational materials with the monocultural approach target a single culture group with a descriptive tone and as objectively as possible. With dominant, well-researched cultures, such as the Japanese culture, abundant reading materials that illustrate explicit and implicit culture points are readily available with materials contributed by authors from a variety of backgrounds. Academic experts often cite empirical research data while foreigners with extensive, personal involvement in that society may produce accounts that are more readable.

The bicultural approach identifies only two specific cultures at a time. Then, potential areas of conflict or confusion are pinpointed and compared, side-by-side. This format seems to lend itself toward educating foreign language learners on the proper sociolinguistic usage in the target culture group by clearly defining the contexts of those contact situations.

The emphasis of this paper is to demonstrate the experiential approach when teaching or learning about another culture. These eight situations are taken from the Japanese culture and they show some actions Japanese take to bring about good luck or to ward off bad luck. In this method, people apply their reasoning ability, based on knowledge, guessing, or intuition, to select the proper response or action that is expected by the defined encounter. Then, in the key solution section, each choice is either confirmed or rejected along with a brief reason, thus providing immediate feedback for the learner.

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