Intercultural Competency Training Workshop
for
U.S. Fulbright ETAs Headed to Japan

Workshop Overview for Peter Fordos, IEMG 8560

Workshop developers:
John Alexander
Kristen Arps
Claire Ballon
Jarod Hightower-Mills
Jenna Tidwell
INTRODUCTION

A customized intercultural training workshop was created for a group of Fulbright English Teaching Assistants in order to help them prepare for their upcoming year abroad in Japan. The primary aim of this initial workshop – which was to be part of the program on the first morning of a 5-day pre-departure orientation – was to introduce concepts and techniques relevant to cross-cultural immersion in general and immersion of young American teachers in Japanese schools in particular.

The target audience was comprised of twenty-two young United States citizens, ranging from 21 to 28 years of age and equal parts men and women, who had each received a Fulbright U.S. Student Grant for an English Teaching Assistantship (ETA) in Japan. The mission of the Fulbright ETA is to help teach the English language abroad while serving as cultural ambassadors for U.S. culture. Everyone in this group had to have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher and at least 100-level proficiency in the Japanese language. Their assignments were varied: primary or secondary schools in urban or rural areas. From needs assessments they had completed and submitted prior to the workshop, the trainers were aware that two-thirds of the group had traveled outside of the United States but the majority had never been in Japan. Also, very few of them had formal classroom teaching experience.

The needs assessment had asked participants to list at least three topics they wanted to be addressed in the workshop, and taking those responses into consideration, the following learning/training goals for the workshop were established:

- Participants will gain insight into Japanese culture, particularly in contrast to U.S. culture.
- Participants will learn how to work with Japanese students and colleagues in an education setting.
- Participants will reflect on the experience of immersion in a different culture.
- Participants will gain awareness of their own cultural backgrounds and learn how to impart that as cultural ambassadors in Japan, particularly to their future students.

Below is an in-depth description of the content covered and activities led in the workshop, followed by a summary of the feedback received from participants upon completion. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and the trainers determined that the workshop was successful.

**Workshop Agenda**

8:00-8:30am  Refreshments, welcome, discussion of workshop goals
8:30-9:00am  Icebreaker activity and debrief
9:00-10:00am  Cultural dimensions and Japan-USA cultural comparisons
10:00-10:30am  Break
10:30-11:00am  Activity and debrief
11:00am-12:00pm  Cultural immersion discussion
12:00-12:30pm  Debrief/close
Introduction to Culture and Cultural Dimensions

After debriefing the ice-breaker activity and connecting it to some of the situations that our Fulbright ETAs might encounter, we transitioned into a general discussion about culture and specific dimensions of culture that will be important to their experience in Japan. We opened our discussion using the Iceberg Model to describe the complexity and intangibility of culture. As English teachers in Japan, not only will they encounter situations where they will have to confront and adapt to cultural differences, they will also have to teach their students about American culture. The essential lesson from our discussion of the Iceberg Model is while it is very easy to see and teach students about the tangible aspects of culture (food, music, dress, etc.), the participants will also need to decode and communicate the deeper aspects of American and Japanese culture and help their students understand and respectfully compare the two cultures.

Once we discussed the issues of culture in general, we turned to the materials from Geert Hofstede's materials on culture to compare American and Japanese culture. Using a graph comparing the US and Japan on the major cultural dimensions that Hofstede defines in his research, we introduced our audience to the meaning of each of the dimensions. Using the bar graph also allowed participants to begin to visualize some of the cultural differences that they might encounter and we will introduce to them during the training. Before diving into some of the dimensions with the most striking differences (individualism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation), this was an opportunity to ask the participants to think about how these dimensions might effect their work. This allowed them to ground what they learn in the latter sections in their own experience and allowed us to identity and address any incorrect, preconceived notions that held by participants (either at the time or during the detailed discussion of the dimensions).
Collectivism/Individualism

The first dimension presented to the group was collectivism/individualism. According to Hofstede (2010), collectivism is when “the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual” (p. 90). Japan scores a 46 on the Individualism Index. Many characteristics of a collectivist society are evident in Japanese society, such as the importance of the in-group and the importance of “和” or “Wa” in Japanese, which translates to “harmony”. In Japanese society, there is a strong importance on maintaining “Wa” within groups.

Although Japan would be viewed as a collectivist culture from a Western perspective, Japan is more individualistic compared to other Asian countries. According to Hofstede (2010), individualism is when “the interest of the individual prevails over the interest of the group” (p. 91). On Hofstede’s website (www.geert-hofstede.com), he explains that the reason Japan is more individualistic than its neighbors is because, “Japan has been a paternalistic society and the family name and asset was inherited from father to the eldest son. The younger siblings had to leave home and make their own living with their core families” (The Hofstede Center). Other Asian countries tend to have more of an extended family structure living at home. In addition, while Japan has a strong focus on group harmony, Japanese have the ability to “select” their in-groups. For example, in junior high schools and high schools, all Japanese students are required to join a club and the students are quite devoted to their clubs. The clubs inform their identity throughout junior high school and high school and the students spend a significant amount of time within that group (the club). However, the Japanese students are able to chose their groups. They have the choice to select which club would like to join, and therefore, selecting a part of their identity. This “in-group selection” can be seen later in life as well when they join a company and show loyalty to their company. Because of these factors, Hofstede notes, “You could say that the Japanese in-group is situational.”

A good example of the mixture of collectivism and individualism in Japanese society can be seen in the “Mydentity” ads by Converse. The ad presents students in their classroom, all wearing their white, grey, and navy uniforms. All of the students are required to dress exactly the same in their drab, conservative attire. However, Converse has contrasted that conformed look with bright, colorful shoes. On top of that, the ad campaign is called “Mydentity” which basically shows a way for students to express themselves as an individual within the strict societal rules they must follow. While collectivism is very strong in Japanese society, there is some individualism present as well and this ad does a nice job of illustrating that point.
Masculinity/Femininity

Japan scores an astounding 95 on the Masculinity Index, the second highest of any country surveyed. According to Hofstede, “A society is called masculine when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (p. 140). This divide between genders is definitely the case in Japan. Understanding the Japan’s cultural expectations within education is also much easier when viewing the system through the values of a masculine society. Like other masculine societies, Japan’s education system is very competitive and thus has very high stakes for its grades. Hofstede says, “In strongly masculine countries such as Japan and Germany, the newspapers carry reports each year about students who killed themselves after failing an examination” (p. 161). The expectations of the teacher/student relationship are also typical of a masculine society in Japan: teacher’s academic expertise and their ability to help students achieve high marks are prioritized over their ability to build rapport with students. This favoring of competition can seem at odds with a culture that leans towards collectivism like Japan, but it finds expression in the form of team-based competition. An example within Japanese schools in particular is the annual event known as Sports Day. The entire school is divided into two teams, red and white, that compete against each other in a number of physical challenges.

Because competition is so high-stakes within Japanese culture, introducing competitive activities into a language classroom can often backfire. Children become so invested in competitive games that if they lose a game it can occupy their thoughts and distract them from learning for the rest of the lesson. We advised prospective teachers to try and incorporate collaborative activities instead, to prevent students from feeling the incredible pressure that comes from competition, or to use activities that allow the class to perform as one giant team competing against their previous best.
Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is how much a society attempts to lower ambiguity regarding the future and to control unknown, future risks. Hofstede (2010) describes, “Laws and rules try to prevent uncertainties in the behavior of other people” (p. 189). On the Uncertainty Avoidance Index, Japanese scores a 92, which is the highest UAI score on the entire planet! Hofstede hypothesizes that this high score could be attributed to the fact that the country of Japan is so susceptible to natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, tsunami, and volcano eruptions. On Hofstede’s website (www.geert-hofstede.com), he explains, “You could say that in Japan anything you do is prescribed for maximum predictability. From cradle to grave, life is highly ritualized and you have a lot of ceremonies.” This strict rule following is present in Japanese schools. For example, there are opening and closing ceremonies at the start and end of every term. These ceremonies are similar in any part of Japan and every school follows the same rituals. The etiquette at social functions is very specific and must be followed. The picture of the tea ceremony is an example of the strict rules that must be followed. At a tea ceremony, there are proper and strict ways of how to sit, act, drink the tea, eat the accompanying snack, hold the teacup, and even look at the teacup. This is an example of how ritualized Japanese society can be, which is reflected in their high UAI score.
CULTURAL IMMERSION

After giving the workshop participants some hands-on experience with cultural challenges that they might face through interactive activities (that could be adapted for their future lessons), we transitioned into a discussion about how to adapt to the challenges of being immersed in a different culture. Specifically, we focused on the stages of cultural adjustment and the actions and tools that the participants could use to manage their adjustment to teaching in Japan. Below is a graph that we used to show the participants that adjusting and adapting to a culture is a cyclical process that develops over one’s time in a culture. Since they will be in Japan for at least one school year, they should expect to encounter most of these stages. In addition, we highlighted for them that each stage is not a smooth progression, but a cycle of ups and downs. As they become more knowledgeable of the culture and more proficient in speaking Japanese, host nationals will expect them to be more and more fluent in the culture as well, potentially creating new setbacks to overcome.

During this discussion, we also pointed out how the process of learning and adapting to Japanese culture will give them insights into American culture. Not only will these insights help them as they think about how to regulate their reactions to cultural differences, but it will also be knowledge that they can incorporate into the cultural instruction that they provide their English students.

Like any experience with moving overseas, the experience of moving to Japan is likely to be accompanied by a fair amount of culture shock. Though at first going to another country can be an exciting and wondrous experience, once the excitement wears off there is often a long period of adjustment where a traveler might experience frustration, isolation, and depression. In a country like Japan, where it takes a considerable amount of time to be accepted into an in-group, this period of adjustment can be particularly long. As a traveler spends more time in the country and becomes more familiar with the cultural practices there, they can begin to feel the excitement of building real knowledge and understanding, but these aha moments are often brief sparks of enlightenment that punctuate a slow and arduous climb to true acclimation to a new country. The telephone construction game (described later on) served a secondary purpose of simulating some of those feelings of frustration accompanied by moments of excitement from successful communication.
We advised keeping patience first and foremost in one’s thoughts when moving to Japan, and for our teachers in particular, we advised to develop a strong awareness of their home culture because they will be expected to be cultural ambassadors for the U.S. and to share their cultural knowledge with Japanese students.

After discussing the stages of cultural adjustment and what the fruits of their adaption might be, we moved into a discussion of what strategies the participants could use to manage the challenges of cultural immersion. Most of these strategies focused on the participants positioning themselves as open, respectful learners of the host culture – having a sense of humor, being open-minded and nonjudgmental, etc. This position will not only help them get the most out of their experience but allow them to model those behaviors and reactions for the students when confronted with “bizarre” things about American culture.

**ACTIVITIES**

In order to enhance the quality of workshop, our team made the decision to include two interactive activities or games, one at the beginning of our presentation to act as an “icebreaker” and one main activity towards the end of our presentation. Both of these activities were meant to engage the participants while directly relating to the content that was being presented. In addition, these activities were also meant to ignite class discussions, and a period of roughly ten minutes was allotted after each activity for the purpose of debriefing the interaction that had taken place during the game.

**Icebreaker**

For our icebreaker, our team chose a game that involved very few materials yet strongly exhibited one of the key dimensions of Japanese culture: collectivism. For this game, each student was asked to stand up and move to an open area of the classroom. After relocating, each student was given a note card with one word written on it. The students were then simply instructed to group themselves as they pleased. Unbeknownst to the students at the beginning of the activity, each of the words belonged to one of five groups, including: sports, food, cities, companies, and arts. The words that were utilized during this game all directly related to Japanese culture and were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Cities</th>
<th>Companies</th>
<th>Arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judo</td>
<td>Sashimi</td>
<td>Osaka</td>
<td>Toyota</td>
<td>Origami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendo</td>
<td>Yakitori</td>
<td>Kyoto</td>
<td>Sony</td>
<td>Calligraphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumo</td>
<td>Mochi</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>Nintendo</td>
<td>Ikebana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karate</td>
<td>Yakisoba</td>
<td>Nagoya</td>
<td>Mitsubishi</td>
<td>Tea Ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aikido</td>
<td>Udon</td>
<td>Sapporo</td>
<td>Toshiba</td>
<td>Woodblock Painting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While participating in this game, students would often have to rely on their peers in order to discover to which group they belonged. In addition, each student would belong to a particular group, and no student would be
singled out or left alone. These aspects of the game emphasize the collectivist ideals of Japanese society and began to introduce the students to the lesson before the actual cultural presentation began.

**Telephone Construction Game**

At the beginning of this game, the students were asked to gather with the other members of their group (each mini-workshop was presented by groups of 4-5 students) and to subsequently number off from either 1 to 4 or 1 to 5. The ones were stationed next to a covered display (pictured above) and were informed that they were only allowed to speak to the person in their group who was a two. The twos and threes then formed a chain of communication between the ones, who could see the display, and the fours and fives, who were seated at a table on the other side of the room with miscellaneous objects. The goal of the game is for the group to recreate the display by passing directions through a chain of communication. For example, the ones can only pass information to the twos, and the twos can only speak to the ones and the threes. Similarly, the threes could only pass information from the twos to the fours and fives, and the fours and fives seated at the table could only obtain information the threes. Therefore, the flow of information is restricted, and the group members must all rely on each other to accomplish the task.

Due to the fact that the team members must all work together to recreate the display, this activity, like the icebreaker, also reinforces the idea of collectivism that is a large part of Japanese cultural. In addition, this activity also exemplifies the hierarchical structure that exists in most Japanese organizations and emphasizes the need to follow a chain of communication in order to pass along information through the ranks of a Japanese business or educational institution.
CONCLUSION

At the end of the workshop, feedback from participants was gathered through a brief discussion and then through written evaluations. The evaluations provided a large amount of positive feedback, as well as some recommendations for improvement. Below is a sample of responses. Overall, the workshop seemed to be an important learning experience for both participants and trainers.

Evaluation Questions and Responses

What did you enjoy most about the training?
- Activities – fun, engaging, clearly related to concepts covered, well debriefed
- Engaging use of personal stories and experiences
- Visuals, Power Point presentation content
- Many different topics covered
- Good balance between info/lecture and activities

What stood out for you?
- Very practical advice that will be useful in the unique context of the Japanese classroom
- Specifically tailored to educators, included classroom activities
- Strong presentation because two of the trainers had first-hand experience teaching and living in Japan; really enhanced the quality of instruction provided
- Complexities of individualism/collectivism and competition/collaboration in Japanese culture
- That Japanese does not stand out as collectivist when compared to other Asian countries, but it does when compared to the U.S.
- Interesting information about masculine culture
- Main activity really demonstrated how things can get lost in translation
- Great debriefing and linking of content and activities
- Importance of patience in cultural immersion

What will you take away with you about this presentation?
- Need to respect local traditions, not make too much change
- Need to accept the existing channels of communications and chains of command/hierarchy in Japanese culture
- Interesting cultural dimensions/dynamics discussed, including how different dynamics overlap
- Cultural differences explained very well
- Interesting points about competition between groups vs between individuals
- Will use the two activities in the classroom – taught a lot of practical skills
- Strategies for keeping calm and remaining effective in the classroom in Japan

What could be improved about this training?
- One part seemed to lull due to too much lecture
- Could have broken up with another group or partner activity or multimedia (video)
- Beginning seemed a little disorganized
- A bit of information overload
- Presenters sometimes interrupted each other, sometimes made it hard to follow the point
- One person seemed to jump in and dominate a lot
- Tighten up transitions
- If there had been more time it would have been interesting to learn about family dynamics in Japanese culture

How would you rate this presentation on a scale of 0 to 10 (10 being highest)?

10 ratings:  7
9.5 ratings:  2
9 ratings:  8
8.5 ratings:  1
8 ratings:  5