

British Council Japan

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# Culture and communication

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## What is culture?

The word means different things for different people, but a dictionary definition is “the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group.”<sup>1</sup> Culture and language interact in interesting ways, making it difficult to teach one without reference to the other.

## How can I bring more cultural activities into my work in schools?

There are a lot of opportunities to bring in a cross-cultural focus to your work in schools. The following topics crop up in many school textbooks and are all amenable to input from you:

- Schools and their rules
- Food
- Sports
- Families
- Gestures
- Festivals and special occasions
- Traditions, customs, superstitions and everyday manners

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionary: [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/culture\\_1?q=culture](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/culture_1?q=culture)  
[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

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## Example activities

You might have a different picture or idea of each of the topics above, depending on the culture or cultures you grew up with. Wherever you lived before coming to Japan, you can deepen these topics by sharing pictures and stories from your own background with your students. The ideas below, which are taken from a UK and US perspective, might help you. Of course, feel free to swap them out for ideas which are more familiar from your own background.

### a) Schools and their rules

Show some photos of the school that you went to (you can make use of Google Maps, if necessary) and, if possible and appropriate, from your school days. Talk about the routines and rules for your school – for example:

- In my school, students don't have to wear a school uniform.
- Students have to say "sir" or "ma'am" to the teacher.
- Students can drive to school. There is a car-park for students' cars.

Students can then compare these rules, routines and facilities to the rules in their own school. Following this, students can design their own "dream school", allowing them to practise expressions with phrases such as "have to/don't have to" and "there is/there are".

### b) Food

If there is a food associated with a special occasion or festival that you are familiar with, you can introduce this to your students. For example, in the UK there is the tradition of Shrove Tuesday<sup>2</sup>, when people typically cook pancakes which they eat with lemon and sugar. You can introduce students to this tradition and teach them the ingredients and a recipe for cooking pancakes. More memorable still would be to arrange with your team-teacher and school to use the Home Economics classroom and actually cook some pancakes.

### c) Sports

If you are familiar with a sport or game which is not that common in Japan, this can also make for an interesting lesson or after-school club activity. Cricket, Gaelic or American football or handball might all be useful candidates.

A childhood game like "What's the time Mr Wolf<sup>3</sup>" is a good way of introducing cultural exchange into lessons or activities which practice numbers and times. If spending time with Elementary school children in the playground, you could also introduce them to the game of hopscotch. In return, you could ask them to teach you a playground game that they like playing.

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<sup>2</sup> For a student-friendly explanation, see this link: <https://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/uk-now/read-uk/pancake-day>

<sup>3</sup> For a simple explanation of the rules (in case you don't know or have forgotten them), see here: <https://www.helpmykidlearn.ie/activities/3-4/detail/whats-the-time-mr.-wolf>

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## What resources should I bring from my home country?

The most practical and easiest materials to bring from your home country are photos and short videos. Photos of local shops, attractions and you with family and friends can often be useful. Even if you don't have these (or don't feel comfortable sharing them), you can often find what you need online.

Other resources that may be helpful include simple story books, simple songs and banknotes/coins from your country.

If bringing restaurant or café menus from home, choose carefully. While fast-food and more casual café menus may work well, the fonts and flowery language used in some restaurant menus often makes them difficult for students to understand.

Note that some embassies provide kits<sup>4</sup> which ALTs can borrow for use in their schools once in Japan, saving you the trouble of bringing over heavy objects yourself. The kits may contain typical cultural objects such as recipes, sports equipment, maps and photos.



Showing students real coins and notes can bring a lesson on money to life (Photo by [Jason Leung](#) on [Unsplash](#)).

## What are some pitfalls to be wary of?

People are naturally curious when they meet someone from an unfamiliar background, and hopefully the ideas in this article will help you to foster positive cross-cultural experiences for you and your students. In this section, we will look at some pitfalls to avoid.

### 1. Avoid over-generalising

It's usually more productive to talk about what you are familiar with, rather than trying to present yourself as typical of a whole country or culture. Rather than saying, "In my country, we~", it's safer to say, "In my family, we~", or "My friends and I often~". This is particularly true if you come from a country with a very diverse population and different micro-cultures. Likewise, don't treat your students as a monolithic cultural block – Japan also has diverse cultures and populations. In other words, try where possible to personalise rather than generalise.

### 2. It's not a competition!

To follow on from the point above, while it can be fun to compare and contrast aspects of different cultures, it's best to avoid evaluating them against each other. If you are feeling homesick, or experiencing culture-shock, it can be particularly tempting to compare the culture of your home country favourably with that of your host country. However, doing so with students

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Australian embassy: [https://japan.embassy.gov.au/tkyojapanese/ajf\\_eakit.html](https://japan.embassy.gov.au/tkyojapanese/ajf_eakit.html)  
[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

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is unlikely to foster positive discussions and more likely to create divisions and an “us and them” mentality.

### **3. Keep it simple**

If introducing a custom, game or other cultural artefact from home, remember that your listeners are foreign-language learners of English. Use words that students are familiar with, where possible, speak slowly and clearly, and use visuals and gestures to clarify what you mean. Also try to keep your explanations compact and allow time for students to think and ask questions.

### **4. Don't overshare**

Students are likely to be naturally curious about you when you arrive at their school and this is something to be pleased and positive about. However, make sure that you only share information that you are comfortable sharing and being shared.

In addition, you can easily kill this interest if you over-exploit it. You may have had experience of a friend or relative who wants to spend hours showing off holiday photos or wedding videos. Generally, it can be hard to maintain enthusiasm for this over an extended period of time. To avoid having a similar effect on your students, keep your presentations about life back home pertinent and brief and make sure to show curiosity about your students too, rather than maintaining a one-sided monologue about yourself and your home country.

### **5. Make it an exchange**

Teachers often like to get students to explain local customs, food or sightseeing spots to their ALT. This can feel more engaging for students if you start the unit or lesson by sharing something similar, but which is unfamiliar to them, from your own background. That way, both you and the students are learning something new about each other.

## **A note about the British Council**

The British Council is a cultural relations organisation, operating in over 100 countries worldwide. We build connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language. We have been present in Japan since 1953 and have been directly teaching students in Japanese schools for over 40 years. We have also provided teacher-training programmes and seminars for Japanese teachers of English and JETs in partnership with the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) and local Boards of Education.