

## “Multiple intelligences: Addressing the needs of the visual / tactile and kinesthetic learner in Japan.”

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### 1. Introduction

“A picture speaks 1000 words.” This is particularly true for Japan, a country with a rich visual culture dating back thousands of years. The Japanese written language is based on “kanji” which are essentially pictograms (each character telling a different story). These kanji characters date back to the Han dynasty in China (206BC-

220AD). The word “Kanji” is also derived from the Chinese word “hànzì” which means Han characters. These days, approximately 5000 - 10,000 kanji are used in written documents, newspapers, and materials throughout Japan. Modern day printed resources in Japan also heavily use pictures. A case in point is the enormous popularity of “manga,” the Japanese style comic book popular with young adults. Its lineage, similarities in cartoon-like style and humor, as well as sequential nature can be traced back to picture scrolls and “*ukiyo-e*” or woodblock prints which existed in Japan in the thirteenth century.

The EFL college level teacher in Japan must be aware of several important factors that influence learning in the classroom: Firstly, the Japanese preference for information presented in a visual form, and secondly, a discrepancy between the homogenous cultural background of their students, their student’s own unique learning styles, and the generic teaching approach favored by the high school education system. In past studies, particularly by Reid and Furuhashi, Japanese EFL learners have been found to be both kinesthetic and tactile learners, preferring a “hands on” approach to class work and visual stimuli over auditory learning.

The high school teaching method favors this framework in part with the “talk and chalk” style of teaching. In this style of teaching the teacher has traditionally dominated the classroom, with students relying on material written on the board to reinforce material introduced verbally by the teacher. In particular, English lessons have been

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found to rely on the grammar translation approach with little emphasis being attached to oral fluency or assertive spontaneity of the students learning English.

The traditional Japanese method of teaching targets visual, reflective and analytical learners, while neglecting the field dependent impulsive learners and any students who have a preference for a tactile or kinesthetic approach to learning. These students have had to cope for years with a system that does not match their learning style.

The EFL communications teacher at college level in Japan faces a doubly big challenge, first by concentrating on oral and auditory skills that Japanese students have been traditionally weak at, and secondly by adopting a student centered communicative approach that Japanese students are wholly unfamiliar with.

For a successful lesson that is communicative the EFL teacher must follow a two-pronged approach: to find a way to introduce oral English into the classroom targeting the tactile / kinesthetic learners, whilst at the same time do it in a way so as not to alienate those students used to the visual learning strategies used in the Japanese high school classroom. This may seem somewhat problematic at first, given that in communicative language classes the lesson focus is on the two basic macro skills of listening and speaking. However, there are many avenues throughout the lesson to use visual resources combined with a tactile approach in order to capture the attention and motivate the Japanese EFL student.

## 2. Objective

This paper will outline some successful teaching strategies that target the visual, tactile and kinesthetic learner in order to motivate and engage a greater portion of students in the Japanese EFL classroom.

## 3. Methodology

The techniques that have been selected have been used extensively and very successfully in low intermediate to high intermediate university classes in Japan. All techniques have been selected because of their success in student-centered, com-

municative classes. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the techniques have not relied on the number of students and have been used in pair-work, small, as well as large group-work activities.

## 4. Historical beginnings:

### A combination of visual and tactile learning

In comparison to Westerners, it has been noted that Japanese people are more reserved, and rarely use body language when communicating with one another. Gesticulation is kept to a minimum and there is little use of the hands in talk. On the other hand, a Japanese watching a debate between two Westerners would be surprised if they were told that the Westerners were not fighting with each other, and not trying to hit, chop, or cut down each other with their exaggerated gestures and body language. However, the perception that Japanese people are passive can be proved to be false if their body language and verbal language is examined.

In contrast to other Asian languages and even European languages, the Japanese language is mono-tonal with 3 basic tones being used for expression. The meanings of sentences are kept vague so as not to offend others or disrupt the group harmony. Often the speakers have to use their intuition to guess the unsaid meaning of words. In order to do this a lot is relied on small cues in the speaker's body language. For effective communication even in Japan, the visual cues from body language are even more necessary than for Western speakers who explicitly state their opinions and ideas. This preference for visual information can be traced right back into Japan's past where new skills were learned through "*kata*."

The Japanese have always followed a hands-on approach to learning new skills. In traditional industries the way of doing something would be taught through watching the teacher and then repeating the teacher's movements. Knowledge was gained, not from excessive verbal explanation like in the West, but through repetition and intuition that comes from self-knowledge. This is one reason why traditional skills take so long

to master in Japan. In contemporary times, a combination of visual and tactile learning is still the preferred approach with companies favoring (on the job) in house training of new employees over recruiting individuals with extensive knowledge gained from specialist degrees or course work. In the classroom the teacher is still the main disseminator of information and skills, however the reliance on visual cues has been translated into copying verbatim written information displayed on the blackboard. This style may pose a problem for the student in an oral communications lesson if the student prefers to concentrate on writing over the actual speaking task assigned to them.

### **5. Visual and kinesthetic strategies in the classroom**

The following combination of visual and tactile strategies have been found to be successful in the Japanese EFL classroom. All of the activities suggested have been selected for their practical value (i.e., the students get hands on experience at developing certain skills that they are able to use outside the classroom in the "real world") and their attractiveness to students long used to information acquired through a visual means. It is hoped that this "hands on" approach will motivate the students intrinsically.

### **6. Translating listening and speaking skills into pictures**

The first suggested strategy targets visual and tactile learners through the use of pictures. Its aim is to decrease the gap between listening time and the spoken response time encountered by students when they are communicating with another English speaker.

It has been said that Japanese students are reflective learners. That is, rather than take the risk of spontaneous communication, they prefer to spend time digesting new grammar or sentence structures before they respond. This habit increases their accuracy of the response, but significantly limits their fluency. An example is when low-intermediate students encounter new vocabulary or new expressions in class. Since

the students like to focus on accuracy over fluency when talking English they become fixed on an unknown word. However, while they are puzzling over the word, in a real life situation the conversation will either have broken down, or moved on to another topic, which the EFL student would be at a loss to talk about.

An easy technique to combat this problem and speed up response time to stimuli is to give students practice at note taking (while listening to English speakers) using "pictures" rather than words written in their native language. They can then use these pictures as a reference to report information or form questions without having to go through the laborious task of translating from Japanese to English and then back to Japanese again, or the other way around. An example here would be a class teaching simple prepositions.

#### **(1) Teaching prepositions**

##### **(Describing the room / house)**

A motivational way to cover prepositions in a lesson is to tie these prepositions to real-world phenomena that are directly related to the student's background or home-life. In this example, the focus of the lesson is to get the students to describe their house / apartment and its internal furnishings to each other using prepositions.

To excite the student's interest to the real life practicality and value of learning how to use these prepositions, the prepositions are inserted into a functional role-play. The students have to imagine that they were doing a house swap with their partner. Before the house swap they are told that they need to find out as much about their partner's house as possible before they make their decision to swap houses.

**Step 1 Listening:** Following a functional approach, students could describe their apartment or room and the furniture in the room to each other in pairs. Student A, who is the speaker, could talk about their room or house and where the furniture is located in the room. Student B who is the listener, could draw a picture of student A's house and location of their furniture in their notebook while they are listening to the

room description.

**Step 2 Reporting:** To check how accurate their listening skills are student B can then look at the picture that they have drawn and talk about the objects and furniture in student A's room. Student A should be able to confirm whether or not student B's listening skills and drawing is accurate during the report.

## (2) Personal Appearance

This "Picture-note taking" skill can also be taught when covering the subject of "appearance." Imagine the scenario where the student is given a situation where they have to find out about the personal appearance of one or more people, or describe the appearance of a friend or family member. A situation that could be suggested might be that the friend or family member is missing so that the student has to give a description to their partner. Alternatively, they may have to find an acquaintance in a crowded room by asking other people if they have seen the person. To do this they need to describe the physical characteristics of the person that they are looking for.

**Step 1 Listening:** Divide the students into pairs. Student A can ask about the appearance of student B's family members, e.g., "What does your father look like?" Student B can answer by describing their family members using adjectives., e.g., "He is tall. He has a round face, etc." While student B is describing this, student A can then draw a picture of Student B's family member using the information in the verbal description

**Step 2 Reporting:** Once the picture has been drawn then the note taking student A can either use the same partner, or change partners to describe student B's family by just looking at the picture they have drawn and reporting the information in English. If student A and B are now working together, then student B can confirm whether or not student A's description is accurate. Finally, to inject some fun into the lesson, student A can show student B their picture and see if it is accurate. This is a "hands on" approach with both partners having to work together using real data to report. It should

appeal to both the visual as well as the tactile learners.

## (3) Explaining maps

**Map drawing:** Another example often used to access the visual as well as tactile learners is teaching directions through using "real life" maps. In order to relate the activities in class to the daily life of the student the students can be asked to draw a map of their own neighborhood. If they are broken up into pairs then one partner, student A, can ask how to get to the their partner's home or a place on the map. Student B can answer by looking at their map and giving directions to student A. Student A can confirm directions by drawing a picture of student B's neighborhood while listening to A and then repeat the instructions looking at their hand-drawn map. If the directions are correct then at the reporting stage the student will be accurately able to describe how to get to their partner's house. Furthermore, both student A's map and student B's map should be similar.

## 7. Kinesthetic directions activities

This unit commonly uses directions and prepositions. Another small activity to access the kinesthetic learners would be to divide the classroom up into areas like a map. Then, the teacher could give an object to one of the students. The teacher can verbally instruct the student to move it to parts of the room using directional language and prepositions. Alternately to make this activity student centered, other students in the classroom could give the student instructions on where to put the object in the room. This tests not only the students listening skills but also their spatial understanding. The exercise injects some fun into the lesson by having the student physically move around.

## (1) Talking about Sports / Culture

Sports and culture is often included as a unit in EFL curriculum. An exciting way to begin this class and focus on the visual and kinesthetic learners is to describe the physical movements of a sport and have the students actually perform

the physical movements while they are listening to the description. To intrinsically motivate the students either a popular foreign sport could be selected, or a well-known Japanese sport. The students will have to guess what sport it is that they are physically performing.

For example, the Japanese art of *karate*, has been selected as the sport for the students to perform because of its appeal to a younger audience (through popularization in the mass media,) as well as the lack of equipment required to perform it. This is easy to do in the classroom regardless of how the student’s desks are arranged because not much room is required for movement. (The students are only required to stand up at their desks.) The teacher can start by telling the students that they are going to perform physical actions to a sport. The students must try to perform the actions while listening to the teacher’s verbal instructions on how to play the sport and guess what it is that they are doing.

If the students are high intermediate or advanced, then there is also room to make the lesson more student-centered. This can be done breaking the students into pairs. One partner could describe the physical techniques of a sport that they are interested in, and the other partner could perform the physical actions from the description and then guess the sport.

An example of a low to intermediate class where the students concentrate on developing their listening skills is as follows:

**Basic Karate upper block** (A block to ward off a punch to the face)

The students might be taught a simple *karate* movement such as “the upper block.” Verbal instructions that the teacher might give to the students could include the following:

**Feet:** “First stand up. Next move you feet apart and bend your legs slightly and lower your hips.”

**Hands:** “Now you should open both hands. Close your hands into fists, and make sure that your thumb is on the outside of your fists. Put your thumb over your index and middle finger.”

**Arms:** “Now move your right hand straight up

the middle of your body while bringing your left hand to the left side of your waist. Next move your right elbow out and turn your right hand to the left. Your right hand should now be in front of your forehead. Your left hand should be next to your left hip.”

These instructions can be repeated several times without any physical action on the part of the teacher. However, after the student’s physical movements have been checked by the teacher, the last repetition of the verbal instructions should be accompanied by the correct physical movements performed by the teacher. This stage is very interesting because the students will realize how accurate they have been with their own interpretation of the English instructions. It may even be humorous if they realize that their actions are far different from the anticipated actions resulting from the teacher’s instructions.

## (2) Story telling / Reporting past events

In the real world and in English class the students will often have the chance to tell a story or report on a past event. A strategy to motivate Japanese students who have been constantly exposed to cartoons from early childhood is to use cartoons and cartoon captions in the lesson. For example, in a functional / communicative class the teacher may be teaching expressions for “surprise and amazement”. To reinforce these expressions and review unit vocabulary the teacher could hand out a comic to groups of students with no captions on it, just pictures. It is the student’s task to create a story from these pictures.

### Step 1 (Making a story)

First, the student can form pairs or small groups. Next, the students can then work together to interpret the picture and summarize what is happening in the picture. This summary can either be in the first person, or in the third person. The students can tell each other or the class what is happening in the story. The summary stage helps to review vocabulary, teach the use of connecting words (e.g. and, but, however) and teach how to use time words such as “when, and while.”

### Step 2 Making the captions & discussion

Next, the students can make captions for the characters in the picture. In this stage they can draw on their expressions for “surprise or amazement” that the teacher used in the class by giving them to the characters in the comic. This step will review and reinforce the new expressions. The students should be prompted to discuss in their pairs which expressions are more suitable for the characters.

### Step 3 Acting out the comic

The final step that students can use is to act out the story contained in the pictures and use the expressions that the students have written in the captions in a role play. This could be small group work or pair work with each person in the group assigned a role of a character in the comic. The groups could perform in front of the class using the key expressions for surprise and amazement that they were taught. This stage should access the tactile and kinesthetic learners by having them actually move around, performing actions while they are doing the role-play. Frequent practise of the target expressions in the role play will also increase the student’s understanding of the contextual usage for these expressions.

## 8. Pronunciation challenges

Pronunciation of English words is a particularly difficult hurdle that non-native speakers face when using English for communicative purposes. In Japan, students have been found most commonly to have problems with the following sound pairs:

S and TH

R and L

V and B

These sounds occur naturally in words used through the lesson. It is the teacher’s prerogative to pick up students making these sounds incorrectly and practice the correct pronunciation through choral repetition. Since this action requires 2 separate skills: auditory skills (listening) and oral skills (speaking), which access different parts of the brain, it is advisable to break up the process of correctly identifying and then

orally constructing these sounds into 2 separate activities.

(1) In the first activity, the teacher should pronounce the sound for the benefit of the student. However, before pronouncing the sound, it is imperative that the teacher should also draw a simple 2-D picture of the movement of the tongue on the board for the class as a whole to see. The picture should show the mouth, tongue, and its relative position to the front teeth. After this picture is drawn the teacher can pronounce the sounds. This will develop student’s auditory skills while capturing the attention of the visual learners.

(2) Next, the students should repeat the sounds / associated words after the teacher while looking at the picture illustrating how their tongues move in their mouths when pronouncing these words.

(3) At stage 3, the teacher should check to see if the students can recognize the correct sounds by asking them to choose between 2 similar sounding words. For example, one word might be (A) “Lun” and the other word could be (B) “Run.”

The teacher could say the word and then ask the students to identify which word was said by raising their left hand for the L word, or their right hand for the R word with their eyes closed. Then they can open their eyes and see if they are correct by watching the teacher. The teacher will have raised one hand and said the word once more to indicate the correct answer. This will check the student’s auditory skills.

(4) At stage 4, if time permits the teacher can continue pronunciation in the lesson with a few different student centered activities to reinforce the key words for pronunciation practice and develop oral pronunciation skills:

**(1) Picture word location activity:** In pairs one student says the key word and their partner finds the associated object in the picture provided.

**(2) Reporting information practice:** Students form groups of 4 to 5 people and make a line. The teacher gives the 1<sup>st</sup> student a phrase in English. That student must repeat what they

have heard to another student in the group. This process continues until the last student is reached. At this stage the last student must write on the board the phrase that he/she has heard. The accuracy of this phrase will check how accurately the information has been passed on to members in the group. The resulting sentences sometimes become distorted due to a low level of listening skill. However, the distortions are a good indicator of difficult words, or pronunciation that the teacher can bring up for the whole class to practice later in the lesson.

**(3) Story telling:** In this activity the students are given the beginning of a story. Their objective is to continue telling a story using key vocabulary (vocabulary linked to the target pronunciation words) they have been taught in class. This reinforces vocabulary, whilst providing opportunities for them to be creative. For an even more challenging scenario, the students could be asked to repeat the previous sentences before they add their segment to the story using new vocabulary that contain the same pronunciation challenges as the previous words. This will reinforce challenging pronunciation of words and phrases.

**(4) Picture telling:** Students could be asked to tell a story about a life experience they have had that is linked to the lessons topic. Then, their partners can be asked to draw a simple picture of the story told by their classmate. This information can then be reported (retold) to a 3<sup>rd</sup> student using the picture as a reference point to report the information.

## 9. Conclusion

The Japanese EFL college level student remains caught between their reliance on the traditional and well tested grammar / syntax approach with its focus on visual stimuli, and their fear for risk taking in making spontaneous conversation. The modern EFL teacher has to be aware that there are multiple learning styles in the classroom and that the traditional teaching method cannot adequately address all of these learning styles. Moreover, it has been found that

the Japanese EFL learner, when compared with other Asian and Western learners prefers a learning approach that is "hands on," involves visual modeling, and gives the student the opportunity to become involved in the learning process in an active way, rather than passively absorbing new information. The teaching style and strategies selected in this paper address this need through decentralizing the classroom and giving power to the students. They target visual and kinesthetic learners with tactile activities that are backed up with visual cues and pictures to slowly draw the greater majority of students into accessing their other learning intelligences that have been ignored by the wholly visual style of learning and teaching that they are used to. It is hoped that this new hybrid style lesson will impact on a broader range of students through appealing to their kinesthetic and tactile intelligences yet reinforcing itself with sufficient visual support.

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### Summary

The Japanese EFL college level student remains caught between their reliance on the traditional and well tested grammar / syntax approach with its focus on visual stimuli, and their fear for risk taking in making spontaneous conversation. The modern EFL teacher has to be aware that there are multiple learning styles in the classroom and that the traditional teaching method cannot adequately address all of these learning styles. In order to access a broader range of learners in Japan, a combination of strategies should be introduced into the classroom that cater for the tactile and kinesthetic learner without alienating Japan's traditional base of visual learners in the classroom.