

Lessening Culture Shock: A Guideline for Teachers Leading Tokai Groups Abroad

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Culture shock, to varying degrees, is experienced by all people who are immersed in a new culture. This entails a certain amount of stress and anxiety for the individual who may well be vacillating between positive and negative feelings toward the new culture. How severely an individual experiences culture shock varies, depending on personality and attitude, the length of stay, language ability, and the differences between the two cultures. Generally, the longer the stay, the more culture shock is experienced. Short-term visitors (such as the Tokai summer group) may not feel the intensity of emotions that a 6-month or 1-year participant does. A program abroad is deemed successful when the students and leader have had a productive and positive experience with a minimal amount of problems. Thorough preparation before leaving Japan will benefit everyone involved. During the pre-departure orientation, the leader can greatly influence the students and do much towards the success of the program. This paper focuses on what should be included during the orientation, based on the author's experience of leading two groups of Tokai Women's College and Junior College students (one for six months and one for three months) to study at the Cambridge Academy of English. The aim of the orientation is to alleviate any stress and anxiety that may be experienced by students visiting a foreign country for the first time. Unrealistic expectations can lead to frustration and disappointment and these factors can be addressed and discussed prior to departure. The group leader should consider including the following areas during the orientation period.

Getting Acquainted with the Group and Group Dynamics

The first step of the orientation is to facilitate the group in becoming comfortable with the leader and each other. During the first session, ice-breakers and games are effective ways to promote good group dynamics and help the leader and the students become acquainted with one another. For example, to memorize names during the first session, I use a game (sometimes known as "Round Robin") in which the students sit in a circle. Each student states her name and something she likes. This continues around

the circle, and each student repeats the information of all preceding students.

To learn more about the students, I have the students interview each other in pairs, then tell the group about their partner. Another common warm-up activity is "Find Someone Who..." (Klippel, 1984) which allows the students to mingle and exchange information. For this activity the leader prepares a list of 10-15 items such as, "Find Someone Who... has been abroad; likes rock music; has a birthday in March," etc. The leader should choose activities that are non-threatening, reveal something of the students' personalities and above all, are enjoyable. Among the wide variety of resource books available, Maley & Duff (1982) and Moskowitz (1978) are two others in which I have found effective warm-up activities.

It is important to develop a friendly, positive atmosphere early in the course so students feel free to discuss any matter with the leader and with each other. Any negative feelings among group members can put a strain on the overall experience and should therefore be dealt with immediately. Should the leader notice any student who does not seem to be actively participating in or accepted by the group, it is necessary for the leader to involve that student as soon as possible. This can be done through group activities in which the alienated student is considered an equal and a valuable team member, and in which the focus is on completing a task enjoyably.

If there is a conflict between students, the leader should be sensitive to it and try not to exacerbate matters by, for example, having two unfriendly students work together against their will. Personal quarrels may not seem serious in themselves, however, in a group-oriented culture like Japan's, they can become paramount for the group. An example of this occurred with my first group when two of the students had an argument over their Christmas travel plans. The entire group split into factions based on their beliefs of who was at fault. The negative feelings eventually dissipated after everyone had successful holidays; however, there needed to be careful planning of group activities prior to that to keep the negative feelings from being disruptive.

In addition to the warm-up activities, the students can fill out a questionnaire (in either English or Japanese, at the leader's discretion) which provides the leader with an idea of their expectations about the program (see the sample form in appendix). This form should include questions about why the student wants to go abroad and what she expects of her experience. This requires the student to reflect on the situation and it also gives the leader an idea of what to address during subsequent sessions. It is particularly useful to get the students to express themselves in writing, as they are probably not going to share their thoughts freely in a group discussion.

Expectations about the Program

Discussing the expectations of the students is perhaps the most crucial aspect of the orientation. After the students have had the opportunity to consider their upcoming program individually, it is then helpful to have a group discussion. The purpose of this discussion is to check if their expectations are realistic. I take the information from

their questionnaires and make an anonymous list of their concerns/expectations on the blackboard for all to see. Another way to make a list of concerns/expectations is to have the students write each of their concerns on a card, using two colors of cards to represent positive and negative expectations which can then be displayed in two lists for discussion. This presents the opportunity to discuss a wide range of topics, such as homestays, classes, travel, and communicating with native speakers. Many of the items can be cleared up simply by the leader saying what is or is not realistic. There are bound to be items that are not so easily explained; however, it is helpful and reassuring for the students to know that other students have similar concerns.

During this session, the leader may answer the questions that arise or inform the students that they will be dealt with at a later date. In the case of my first group, there were so many concerns expressed about homestays that I chose not to address them, but told the students we would devote the following session exclusively to those matters.

After learning the students' expectations of the program, the leader will have a much clearer idea of what needs to be covered during future sessions. The leader needs to create a syllabus for the orientation program in accordance with the time constraints, yet also remain flexible to accommodate the individual needs of the group.

Information about Classes Abroad

Information about their academic life will also help students avoid disappointment. The leader should establish whether students will be studying in a multi-national class or separately in an all-Japanese class, whether they will be graded, whether they will be expected to attend all classes, and whether they will have time to travel. (N.B. Thus far, Tokai students have studied in all-Tokai classes at C.A.E. — it is very important that the students are aware of this before leaving Japan.)

What is expected of Japanese college students in Japan is different from what is expected of students in western schools, therefore it is beneficial to discuss the importance of class participation, punctuality, and homework. Haji (shyness) is a major cultural difference that precludes speaking out and expressing opinions and may cause difficulty for the students while abroad. The students should be aware that active participation is encouraged in class and that their reluctance to participate may be misinterpreted as a lack of effort, interest, or understanding.

Students must be encouraged to ask questions when they do not understand something while living in a foreign culture. The leader should constantly check that the students understand all that is said during the orientation and train them to speak out if something is unclear. This can simply be phrases such as Excuse me? Could you repeat that? The leader should also give positive reinforcement for anything the students say in English and make them aware that in western schools it is often better to say something incorrectly than to say nothing, and making mistakes is essential to mastering English. It is also useful at this point to discuss how much their English will improve depending on the length of their stay and their effort, again, to avoid unrealistic expecta-

tions.

Living Situation

The goal of the homestay preparation is to prevent unhappiness and the desire to change families after arriving. The students generally expect to have a host family with a mother, a father, small children, and a pet. Students must be prepared for other types of households and understand that they may be treated as a family member or simply as a boarder. Among the hosts of my two groups there were single parents (male and female), a single elderly woman, and British citizens who had emigrated from other countries. If students are encouraged to keep an open mind and are aware of the homestay possibilities, much disappointment can be avoided.

The leader should inform the students of all information available regarding living conditions. Is it possible that they will have a roommate? If so, Japanese or non-Japanese? What is the cost of the homestay? Will they pay by the week or by the month? Can they expect to do things with a host family in their free time? The leader should contact the housing officer at C.A.E. shortly before leaving Japan to gather what information is available. All of the details may not be available, however the leader can inform them of the general conditions and of the possible situations.

The students should be familiar with the general household customs of the host culture and be sensitive to the host family's habits. This includes understanding the value of helping with the housework —something that is not always a part of a young Japanese person's daily routine. Helping with the housework not only promotes good relations with the family, but also allows the student more contact with the family and opportunities to speak English. Upon arrival, they should learn the household rules regarding washing, use of hot water, meal times, quiet times, and so on. The students should understand that people in England often go to bed earlier than people in Japan, and that they must be quiet when the family is asleep. They should also be encouraged to talk with the family as much as possible, but also be sensitive to their privacy — most of these families have student boarders year round.

General Background/Appreciation of the Host Culture

The amount of time spent on learning about the host culture will depend largely on the length of the orientation class. Students should at least be familiar with a map of the country and essential facts regarding the climate, food, institutions, and daily life. To draw the students' attention to their present knowledge of the country, the leader can have them draw a map from memory and brainstorm things they know about the culture. The students can then do research on the country during or outside class. If there is enough time, students can research various aspects of the culture and make presentations and/or posters for the class. If the leader has been to the country before, slides or photographs are useful. This is also the time to discuss customs that are new to the students, such as tipping. Students should realize that their knowledge of and interest in

the host culture will be appreciated by others when abroad, as well as enhancing their experience.

Talking about Japanese Culture

Many students are not aware of how difficult it is to discuss their own culture because it has never been required of them before. However, this is one of the most valuable skills when living abroad. The host families, locals and students from other countries are interested in learning about Japan and this is the essence of cross-cultural exchanges — learning about each other's cultures. Students tend to think that they are going abroad to learn about other cultures, forgetting that the other foreign students have the same goal. For a meaningful cross-cultural experience to occur, students must interact with people of other cultures, not simply listen and observe.

The leader should have the students practice explaining various aspects of Japanese culture in English. One technique for doing this is to have the students brainstorm topics (e.g. arranged marriages, tea ceremony, entrance examinations, holidays) while the leader writes them on the blackboard. Each student then chooses one or two topics to explain in the following class with a two or three minute informal speech. For additional ideas and pictures of cultural items, see Nicholson and Sakuno (1982). The students should also watch or read the news and formulate some ideas (in English) on the current issues. European students tend to be very interested in world news and Japanese students will feel less out of place if they have some common knowledge and are able to converse about a variety of subjects.

"Eikaiwa"

For the native speaker of English as group leader, the main focus of the orientation may be "English Conversation." The leader should consider the following: what skills will help these students in their daily life and social interactions with people of other cultures? Is the ability to start a conversation with a stranger strictly linguistic, or is it cultural as well? How useful will memorized phrases actually be?

The inclination to teach "survival English" (i.e. asking directions, ordering food, etc.) is understandable and useful, to an extent. In general, if the student needs to find the post office or eat, she will manage it. Role plays and listening activities for this type of functional English are certainly valid and good practice for the students, but should not be the only "English." By discussing Japanese culture the students gain valuable language skills as well as information. They can also be exposed to English by discussing British culture and current issues. As for making small talk and becoming acquainted with a stranger, the students can practice interviewing their non-Japanese leader. The students should also be encouraged to develop their listening comprehension outside of class through tapes, videos, radio or television.

Cross-Cultural Observation Skills and Culture Shock

Some general discussion or explanation about culture shock and its various phases should be covered in the pre-departure orientation. This includes what culture shock is, why people experience it, and the ups and downs involved in the experience. The leader should stress the importance of keeping an open and objective attitude when observing another culture. This is not only an opportunity for the students to view another culture, but to acquire a better understanding of their own as well. I found many practical ideas in the materials presented by the Experiment in International Living for their group leaders (1984).

Homesickness is one symptom of culture shock and a perfectly natural aspect of any overseas program. However, there are healthy limits to it. Students should be encouraged to keep active while abroad and at the same time take care of their health. The leader should discuss jet lag before going abroad, to help avoid health problems caused by lack of sleep or poor eating habits. The students will feel stronger emotionally if they are physically well.

Miscellaneous Details

This is the opportunity to discuss what to bring, safety while abroad, home-school rules and to address other unanswered questions. Regarding what to bring, the students must know passport and visa requirements, how much money they will need, what type of clothing and gifts to bring, luggage restrictions, and if they will need an international student identification card for discount prices. It is a good idea for students to bring some photographs of their family and life in Japan, as well as some traditional clothing if space permits.

Home-school rules regarding travel and driving should be clearly stated before going. If the students will be using bicycles, then bicycle safety needs to be taught. It is highly advisable that students not be permitted to travel alone and that they always inform the leader and the host family when going away from the home area. Students should know what to do in case of theft, passport loss or illness, and to carry emergency contact numbers when traveling.

Conclusion

It has been my experience that most problems occur when the students have unrealistic expectations and their fears have not been properly addressed prior to departure. But if the above areas are dealt with and the group leader conveys enthusiasm and confidence throughout, an excursion abroad should prove a positive experience for all concerned.

References

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- Nicholson, P. & Sakuno, R. (1982). *Explain Yourself! An English Conversation Book for Japan*. Kyoto, Tokyo: YOHAN/PAL.

Note: *Cross-Cultural Orientation: A Guide for Leaders and Educators*, can be obtained through The Experiment in International Living, Brattleboro, Vermont, 05301, U.S.A.

APPENDIX: Sample Handouts Used in Orientation

Questionnaire (to be given in English or Japanese)

Name:

Address:

Phone number:

PERSONAL INFORMATION

1. What are your interests/hobbies?
2. Describe your family.
3. Why do you want to study abroad?

EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE PROGRAM

1. What do you expect your English class in (*program site*) to be like?
2. What do you hope to learn in (*duration of program*)?
3. What is your image of the school?
4. What kind of friends do you hope to make?
5. How will you improve your English?
6. What kind of host family do you expect to have?
7. What kind of host family do you want to have?
8. What do you hope to do after class and on the weekends?
9. With whom do you expect to spend your free time? (e.g. foreign classmates, Japanese friends, teachers, host family, etc.)
10. What would you like to do in this preparation class?

TRAVEL

1. Have you ever been to a foreign country?
2. Have you ever been away from your family for (*duration of program*)?
3. Have you ever traveled without your family in Japan?
4. Where would you like to travel while in (*host country*)?
5. Would you like to travel alone, in a small group or with a tour group in your free time?
6. Do you enjoy trying different foods?

HEALTH

1. Do you have allergies?
2. Do you have any illness or special medical condition I should know about?
3. Do you get sick often? (e.g. colds, stomachaches, etc.)
4. Are you taking any medication?

Cultural Observations

The last Cambridge group wrote a list of differences between English and Japanese cultures. The following statements are some of the things that they found to be different.

“English blow their noses anytime. It’s not comfortable for me, particularly when I eat something.”

“English people try to get sunburns on purpose.”

“In Japan, we usually wait for all people to sit down at meals, but my host family does not wait.”

“In a pub, we have to pay money when we receive a drink.”

“My host family gets up at 8:20. (too late).”

“Many stores aren’t open on Sunday.”

“My host mother goes buying food only once or twice a month.”

“Host father helps host mother cook dinner and wash dishes.”

“English people who ride a bike use hand signals.”

“My college isn’t as free as CAE.”

“There aren’t a lot of clubs at CAE.”

“In England the sun sets very late.”

“It’s darker in rooms in England. They don’t use florescent lights.”

“In England people speak a lot during meals.”

“In England people close the door when they are in the room and they leave it open when they are out.”

“My host family often kisses each other.”

“We couldn’t flush the toilet at midnight.”

“When we get on a bus, we must pay money to the driver.”

“There are parties every week at school.”

“There are many activities at school in the evenings.”

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"Young people are encouraged to go out at night in England, but not in Japan."

"My host mother scolds her child who is only 2 years old. In Japan we are indulgent to babies."

"Some children work in England. (e.g. delivering newspapers.)"

"My host mother hangs the washing out to dry, even at night."

"Mothers or fathers take their children to school in the morning and bring them home after school."

"In England husband and wife go to parties together."

"People don't wash their laundry everyday."

"In England, they think young people should not stay home at night. In Japan we are not allowed to go out at night."

"In England, many people go on holiday."

"We must give tips in restaurants."

"Our college class doesn't divide the English level of individuals."

"On Sunday there are no buses."

"Our school's principal isn't as friendly as Mr. DeWaal."

"In England people often hold a party or bar-b-que."

"People don't associate as neighbors."

"The water contains a lot of lime."

"It seems difficult for English to distinguish a Japanese and Chinese."

(Teacher's note: These statements were taken from a final homework assignment given to the students by C.A.E. teacher Mario Rinvoluceri. This list may be used as a basis for discussion during orientation to make students aware of some cultural differences they may expect or simply to give the leader an idea of what the students find remarkable.

Useful Suggestions from Past Students

These are helpful suggestions gathered from the reports of previous students and teachers who went to Cambridge. Please read this carefully, and be sure you understand.

Travel

1. Get a student identity card before you leave Japan. This card will save you a lot of money in Europe and can be used for travel, concerts, museums, etc., discount prices.
2. Buy a small Europe/British travel guide book in Japanese before you leave Japan.
3. In England, travelling by coach (bus) is cheapest.
4. If you make European friends, you may be invited to visit their homes - don't miss this wonderful opportunity!

What to Take to England

1. Warm, simple clothes. It is often rainy and cold. Casual clothes for school.
2. Do not take too much. You will probably do a lot of shopping. Extra weight must be paid for, either at the airport if your luggage is too heavy, or at the post office, if you ship it back. Also remember that you must carry your own bags in the airport and in stations.
3. Small, inexpensive gifts from Japan for your friends and family.
4. Photographs of your home and family, friends, pets, etc. in Japan.
5. Money — mostly in traveler's checks and a credit card if possible. How much you will need depends on how much you intend to travel and shop.

Host Families

1. You may not know who you will be staying with until you arrive in England.
2. You could find yourself staying with a family with or without children, or with an elderly couple, or a single man or woman.
3. In some houses you may be treated like a member of the family, but in others you may simply be a renter. In any case, try and talk to your host family as soon as you can to explore your own situation.
4. In extreme cases, it may be possible to change families, but this is difficult. So please try hard to adapt, and make the best of the situation. Remember, the beginning of all homestays is difficult for everyone. Things will be different from what you are used to, and from what you might expect, but that is all part of your foreign experience, so be patient. (Of course, if you are really unhappy, please ask to be moved.)

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5. You might not have access to a washing machine in your house. Ask your family. Be careful about how much hot water you use. Check with your family about washing and bathing times and be sure to get clear instructions.
6. Each house has its own rules and you will need to find out what these are. Remember, you are expected to be ADULTS in England (you are over 18) so please be responsible.
7. If you have strong feelings about living in a house with children or you are allergic to cats, for example, let me know soon.

Feelings — What to Expect

Your stay in England will be both exciting and frightening. There will be good times and not-so-good times. Feeling up and down is normal and healthy when living in a new culture. When you feel down, learn from the experience. When you are in phase #2 or #4, do something you enjoy to help cheer yourself up and remember that most people have the same feelings when adjusting to a new culture. Here are the phases you may experience while in England. (Remember — the more English you speak, the faster you will adjust!)

1. **"The Honeymoon"** — Everything is new and exciting. You are very happy to be there.
2. **"Culture Shock"** — The excitement is gone. You see the differences in cultures. You aren't sure how to relate to your host family, boys other students, etc...
3. **"Surface Adjustment"** — You begin to understand and make some friends. You can communicate basic ideas.
4. **"Problems"** — You may have problems with your family or friends. You may wonder why you came to England and feel homesick.
5. **"I Feel at Home"** — You accept the new culture and feel at home. You understand that it's a different way of life.
6. **"Departure Concern"** — You feel you've changed and have mixed feeling about going home.

(Note: these 6 phases were adapted from Levine & Adelman's (1982) chapter on cultural adjustment.)