

Japanese Writing

Purpose:

This lesson is intended to introduce students to the three writing systems of Japanese: Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji.

Target Grade Levels: 6-8

Essential Questions:

1. Why does the Japanese Language have three different writing systems?
2. Why does the Japanese Language have a writing system for foreign words?
3. Why was Kanji, the Chinese ideographic writing system, brought to Japan?
4. Why might Japanese children spend a larger portion of their school day studying language than American children do?
5. Why might words written in Kanji be easier to read than English words?
6. Why might Japanese children who are living overseas have difficulty reading Kanji upon their return to Japan?
7. Have there been other writing systems that use ideographs (pictures) like Kanji?

Rationale:

Exposure of students to systems of writing used by citizens of the world.

Materials:

1. A sampling of various world writing systems not based on Roman Alphabet
example: Arabic, Chinese, Egyptian, Hebrew, Japanese and Korean
2. Web site: Kids Web Japan (<http://jin.jcic.or.jp>) language lab and index
3. Reading: "What? No ABC'S? BUT HAVE THEY GOT CHARACTER!". page 39
Omiyage by Turkovich, Ashida and Mueller, World Eagle 1990
4. Handout A: "Some Basic Kanji to Try"
5. Poster Board, markers, crayons and paint

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Activities:

1. Show samples of world writing systems so that students will begin to understand that not all languages use the Roman Alphabet.
2. Briefly introduce the Japanese writing systems by showing a transparency of "What? No ABC'S?" This will help guide the students on their internet search.
3. Divide the class into small groups. Using the internet site: Kids Web Japan, students will explore the three writing systems of Japanese language and will be prepared to discuss the essential questions.
4. After the internet research, the class will discuss the essential questions.
5. Using Handout A: "Some Basic Kanji to Try", students will practice writing Kanji.
6. Students will gather in small groups to write a mini story in English which uses at least 10 of the Kanji in the place of the English words.
7. Each group will prepare a poster board display of the story which includes Kanji and pictures, and then will read their story to the class.
8. Divide the class into three groups:
 - a. 1 group will make name tags by writing their names in Katakana
 - b. 1 group will make flash cards of basic greetings in Hiragana
 - c. 1 group will develop their own kanji by drawing a picture, simplifying the picture and then stylizing the picture into a kanji prototype.
9. Each group will share their project with the class.

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Assessment:

In addition to the evaluation of the various projects and the students' explanation of them, the teacher will revisit the essential questions to see if there are any different perceptions at the conclusion of this process. In addition, the teacher will lead a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the three writing systems of the Japanese language as compared to our alphabetical system of writing words and concepts.

Grade Adaptation:

This lesson is intended for upper elementary or junior high students. It could be adapted for early elementary by using classroom aides to lower the teacher-student ratio and by limiting the project to the study of Kanji only. Students could write a sentence which contains a few kanji rather than write an entire story.

Relationship to Social Studies Standards:

Grades 6-8, People in Societies, Benchmark A

Compare cultural practices, products and perspectives of past civilizations in order to understand commonality and diversity of cultures.

This lesson was originally developed by Dr. Jennifer Farkas, Global Institute Coordinator, Dublin City Schools, and was revised by Janelle Wargo, Japanese teacher, Stow Monroe Falls High School, Stow City Schools.

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TEACHER INFORMATION

A Lesson on Japanese Writing

Answers to Essential Questions:

1. Kanji was first brought to Japan through Korea, probably around the 3rd century. Since the Japanese did not have their own writing system at this time, they adopted these ideographs to write their own language. Ideographs represent ideas rather than sounds. However the sounds of Japanese words signifying ideas were not the same as those of the Chinese words, so it became necessary to develop writing systems to represent Japanese sounds. Hiragana and Katakana were developed by devising simple forms, based on or adapted from some ideographs to which were assigned a fixed sound. Katakana is used to describe a word of foreign origin and Hiragana can be used for all native Japanese words.
2. Katakana with its straight lines and sharp angles represents italics in Japanese and is used to make foreign words stand out. It is used for onomatopoeia.
3. Kanji was brought to Japan through Korea about the 3rd century because Japan did not have a writing system of her own at that time.
4. There are 1,945 kanji that must be mastered to graduate from junior high school. 996 Kanji and the Hiragana and Katakana alphabets must be mastered to graduate from elementary school.
5. Each symbol stands for an idea or word, rather than individual letters or phonetic syllables in a word.
6. Kanji requires daily practice to keep them in active memory.
7. Yes, Hieroglyphics were ideographs.

The following Kanji practice sheet (Handout A) was developed by Dr. Virginia Carroll, Kent State University.

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Handout A

[illegible]