

Using a TV Matchmaking Format in the Classroom

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Introduction

One of the easiest and best ways to promote student-to-student interaction is to use role playing in a culturally relevant context. Activities that allow for exploitation over a wide range of age and ability groups are particularly useful, and Japanese culture can provide any number of suitable formats.

For many years, Japanese television has carried matchmaking programs. Perhaps the best known in recent years was the original "Neltun Club", hosted by the comedians Takaaki and Noritake. In the last year, the show has undergone a radical transformation from a strictly first-meeting matchmaking format towards that of a disgruntled lovers' swap meet, but it is the original format that offers excellent opportunities for classroom use. Given the popularity the show had (it ran for several years), and its rather simple format (only the location changed), its adaptation to a classroom setting presents little or no problem, and involves all students directly.

Essentially, a group of "men" and a group of "women" introduce themselves, giving their names, ages, and educational or work backgrounds. They are then allowed to mix for the ostensible purpose of meeting an ideal date.

The program ends when the "women" line up shoulder to shoulder and the "men" take turns asking to see the one they liked best again. Their declarations range from the relatively simple to the more melodramatic. More than one "man" can approach the same "woman". This is done after another's declaration by saying "chotto matte" (just a moment), and then walking up to make one's own declaration. The "women" signal their intentions by either taking the hand of a successful suitor or by saying "gomen nasai" (I'm sorry). Unsuccessful suitors often then run away.

Preparation

Most Japanese students have some difficulty in expressing opinion and preferences toward each other, particularly when the tone is negative or the setting has a potential for social embarrassment. This can be overcome in the classroom by creating role-playing identities through the use of role cards. The technique also offers an opportunity to create variety in gender (such as in single-sex classes), opinions, backgrounds, and preferences, that might be lacking in the classroom.

Typically, I would make role playing cards for each student that would include the following: names--some of which would be either famous or notorious (e.g. Madonna, Beat Takeshi, etc.); ages; backgrounds--from prestigious university to street dancer or motorcycle-gang member; and a few likes and dislikes--virtues and mild vices included. Each card asks that students be prepared to go beyond this limited information in creating their own identity. By varying the range of preferences in the cards, it can be ensured that this happens. Higher level students have needed little prompting in this regard.

Procedure

a) First the teacher asks the students about the program or type of program. If they are between the ages of 15 and 35, most, if not all of them, should be aware of it. If not, others who have seen it

could briefly explain the program to them.

b) Role playing cards are then given to the students to study on an individual basis. Lower-level students might be allowed to keep them for the duration of the role play while higher-level ones might be required to turn them in before it begins.

c) The "men" line up shoulder to shoulder on one side of the room, while the "women" do the same on the other. Role playing cards have created a sufficient number of both sexes. The teacher then plays the role of one of the comedians, interviewing the players first in one group, then the other. This is done by asking their names, ages, and backgrounds in a light-hearted manner, and by trying to involve the students from the other group across the classroom. One way, though smacking of elitism, is to make one of the "men" a Tokyo University student. When he announces the fact, I would say to the "women", "Look what we have here, Todai!". University status is a very important, though declining, social marker among the marriage conscious. One way of mitigation any encouragement of elitism would be through discussion after the activity.

d) Players then spend 15 to 30 minutes trying to meet as many members of the opposite group as possible, and only speaking in English. The teacher can mix and monitor the conversations with a view to discovering communication patterns that might need review or development in future lessons.

e) After this mixing, players replicate the shows ending. The "men" take turns making their declarations to the "women" who are free to either accept or reject them. There is no reason, however, why this could not be reversed by having the "women" make the declarations. Invariably, there are a mix of acceptances and rejections, as in the real show, but the use of role playing cards will eliminate any embarrassment.

Follow-up Activities

There are many potential follow-ups. These could include:

a) discussions about the reasons for rejection

b) discussions about why certain preferences are held

c) discussions about dating, marriage, and social norms, either intra- or interculturally.

d) introduction of more complex language for expressing preferences e) reading or writing activities based on the role play , i.e. write a letter to the one you liked best