

yokohama echo

No. 373
Vol.32 No. 07

07
2007
Since 1976

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Back to School



A new aural challenge hit my ears before my brain could process the words I had just heard. My tongue felt solid. Any words that did escape my mouth remained half-formed. Other students' voices swirled around me, muddling my brain as the teacher's voice sputtered out a series of adjectives and verbs through the headphones. In a corner of the Language Lab I mopped up my tears and stuffed crumpled tissues back into my pocket. My first week of Japanese Language classes was ending and culture shock had hit me.

I had already been living in Yokohama for five months when I started the classes. Previously I had lived and taught at a high school in Japan for a year. I've travelled all over the country from Hokkaidō to Kyūshū on various visits over more than a decade. I really wanted to live in Japan again. Culture shock wasn't something I was expecting this time. But feeling incompetent, over-reacting to difficult situations and sudden mood changes were all unmistakable signs that pointed to the impact that going back to school was having on me.

That's what the "shock" of culture shock is all about. It can strike in ways and at times you don't expect. We all carry within us often unconscious assumptions, based on our home cultures, about the way people perceive the world, think and behave. Some cultural differences are clear and obvious, but others are subtle. When moving to a new country the obvious and subtle cultural differences are often mixed with personal struggles, such as living away from home for the first time, starting a new job or raising children without the support of an extended family.

In my case it was the culture of the classroom that knocked me around. My two University degrees and more than 20 years of professional work experience, including teaching adults, suddenly seemed to count for nothing. Despite a keen desire to improve my Japanese significantly while living here and a habit of lifelong learning, I was unprepared for the reality of studying at a *senmon gakkō* (vocational school). My previous Japanese studies were sporadic and

conducted in English. They ended six years ago. I was more used to problem-based learning than the repetitive drills in unison with my classmates that took me back to primary school days. It was a shock to find I couldn't keep up with people half my age. In addition, being of a fairly solitary nature, the sudden immersion in group activities felt like an assault on my sense of self. My normal adult confidence gave way to feelings of incompetence and frustration.

A few weeks later the shock has passed. Although many lessons continue to be tough going and I often experience frustration, I'm getting used to the teaching methods and finding snippets of competence most days. Weekend excursions to walk the wooded tracks between Kamakura's ancient temples or listen to the sea wash the grey shingle along Sagami Bay taste sweeter now they are rationed. My equilibrium is returning.

Culture shock is a process that usually has a positive outcome. It is often described as having several stages, such as an initial honeymoon period when everything feels wonderfully interesting, followed by a period of emptiness or rejection of the culture, and finally adjustment and integration. Anxiety, frustration, irritability, helplessness, dislocation and anger are all typical feelings reported when the honeymoon phase ends. Reverse culture shock can also hit after returning to your home country.

For some simple advice on dealing with culture shock, see "The Big Move" article by Tia Powell on the Tokyo English Life Line website at <http://www.telljp.com/articles/thebigmove.html>.

Leanne Mumford