



Lesson 3: Cultural Curve Ball

Objective: Students will be able to:

Identify different ways that players, coaches, and managers communicate with one another in baseball.

Understand that players who come from other countries often must learn new methods of communication.

Create their own signs and signals for use in a classroom game. Time

Required: 1 class period

Materials Needed:

- Copies of "The Changeup: Playing Ball 6,000 Miles from Home" for each student (included)
- Large sheets of chart paper
- Markers
- Access to a gym, or another large open space

Vocabulary:

Interpreter - A person who translates orally for people conversing in different languages



Lesson

1. Review that in Major League Baseball today, players come from all over the United States and the world. There are players who speak many different languages such as English, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean. Players also speak with regional accents.
2. Ask students, "Which of you have ever played a team sport? Is it important for teammates to talk to one another during a game? Why is communication in sports important?"
3. Discuss that in baseball, as in all team sports, players, coaches and managers need to communicate with each other to be successful. Some of this communication is done with words, such as when a catcher visits the mound to settle down a pitcher.
4. Other communication is done without words. This is an especially important means of communication in baseball. A catcher tells the pitcher what pitches to throw by flashing signs with his fingers as he crouches behind home plate. One finger may be a fast ball, two a curve ball, three a change-up. Managers and coaches also communicate with signs. A manager will often give a batter a sign to let the batter know what to do. For example, the manager might sign to the batter to bunt.
5. Ask students, "What do you think it might be like for a baseball player to move to another country and learn to communicate with his new team? Would he be able to communicate with words? Would he be able to understand the on-field signs?"
6. Explain that situations like this happen not only in U.S. baseball, but also in other countries with professional baseball leagues. Players develop the same "baseball language" which includes the words, phrases, and signs they need on the field.
7. Aside from language, brainstorm other challenges that baseball players might encounter as they live and play in other countries. Create a list on the board or on a piece of chart paper. Possible answers include:
 - Food Clothing
 - Customs
 - Music

8. Discuss that sometimes, unfamiliar language, food, and social customs add to the challenges foreign-born players face as they adjust to life in the United States. The same is often true for American players who play outside the U.S.
9. Explain that today you will read an article by major league baseball player Brian Sweeney, who spent part of his professional career in Japan. There, he learned to live and work in a culture very different from the one he was familiar with.
(You can learn more about Brian Sweeney's baseball career here:
<http://www.baseball-reference.com/players/s/sweenbr01.shtml>)
10. Hand out copies of the "The Changeup: Playing Ball 6,000 Miles from Home" (included).
11. Either read to your students, or allow them to read "popcorn style" depending on the reading level of your students.
12. Reflect on the reading, and ask students to identify some of the challenges Brian Sweeney faced when he was getting used to life in Japan. What things did he like about life in Japan? What things did he not like as much? What did he learn?
13. Introduce the activity



Activity

1. Explain that students will be playing the familiar game 'Simon Says', but rather than using words, students will be using signs.
2. *Note* This activity works best in a gym, or outdoors, or in another large area where two groups can work separately without distracting one another.
3. Divide your class into two large groups. Give each group one large sheet of paper and some markers.
4. Have each group work together to write down a list of 5 actions, and then create signs or signals that represent each action (not just doing the action itself). For example,
 - Simon Says...jump in place = Simon taps his/her nose
 - Simon Says...stretch up tall = Simon waves his/her right hand
 - Simon Says...hop on one foot = Simon tugs his/her ear
5. Allow each group to play 'Simon Signs' a few times just within their own group, giving multiple students the chance to be 'Simon.' Remind students to use only signs - no words!
6. Now have half of the students from Group 1 and half of the students from Group 2 switch groups. Both groups should then continue to play 'Simon Signs' as they did before the switch.
7. Let this process play out in the individual groups without giving further instruction. Some groups might take the time to explain the action signs to the new members, some won't. No matter what happens, the experience is valuable.
8. *Optional* You may do this activity in partnership with another classroom. Once your students have learned the appropriate action signs and have played the game a few times, have half of your students and half of the students from the other class switch places.

9. Bring the class back together as a whole group and reflect on the activity. What did the students who switched groups experience when they joined a new group? Did anyone in the group explain to the new members what to do? Did the new members just have to watch and learn? Was it easy to pick up on the new action signs? Did anyone feel confused?
10. Guide students to recognize that their feelings and experiences playing 'Simon Signs' are very similar to the feelings and experiences of baseball players when they travel to new places to play ball. Sometimes other players are very helpful. They can teach new players signs and words that they need in order to play, and also help them get used to the culture outside of the ballpark. Other times, new players might have a hard time picking up on words and signs, and learning to live in a new culture isn't easy.

Conclusion:

To conclude this lesson, ask students to think about their experiences today when they encounter someone new in their community. Ask, "What could you do to make someone new feel at home?"

To check for understanding, give students a homework assignment to write a letter to Brian Sweeney. In the letters, students may relate any topic they found interesting in his account of life in Japan, and ask questions as well.

The Changeup: Playing Ball 6,000 Miles from Home

by Brian Sweeney

Growing up in New York, I was a Yankee fan and I always pictured myself as the next great shortstop for the Yankees. Little did I know, I would become a pitcher and during my baseball journey I would play for five different major league organizations and five other professional teams on three different continents.

One part of my journey took me to Japan. It is a fascinating country with great food, incredible scenery and people who go bananas for baseball! I played for the Nippon Ham Fighters on the northern island of Hokkaido in the city of Sapporo. The climate is similar to New York with its four seasons but that is where the similarities stop. There were many challenges that I had to deal with on a daily basis like ordering food, speaking, reading and communicating, adjusting to different social customs and most importantly, doing my job on the baseball diamond. With each challenge I had a decision to make: I could accept the challenge and use it as a learning experience that will help make my stay in Japan more fulfilling, or I could let each challenge overcome me, which in turn would make my stay in Japan a short and unfulfilling waste of time.

The Japanese language is fascinating but it is nothing like English. Even translated sentences can sound backwards to us. For example, if I said, "I want to go to the store". Translated to Japanese it would sound something like this: "To the store I want to go". I was very fortunate to have an interpreter with me at the field so understanding baseball-related things was a little bit easier, but once I went home I was basically on my own. I learned how to speak Japanese at a slow pace but with each year I was in Japan, communicating became a little easier. I was there for 3 seasons so I like to tell people I can speak like a three year old!

Reading and writing in Japan was tough. Some cities use our alphabet on signs and other things but most of the time you have to read Japanese characters. And they have three kinds of them! Katakana, which consists of 48 characters, Hiragana, that has 48 characters, and Kanji. Kanji is probably the one you are most used to seeing because each character looks like a picture. I was told there are over 30,000 Kanji!

Reading and communicating was quite important when I went into restaurants. Ordering food was always a treat because sometimes I would have no idea what I ordered. If the menu was in Japanese with no English or pictures, I would just point at something and hope it was what I liked. Most of the food was incredibly delicious but some things like raw horse, raw chicken, intestines and fermented soybeans were foods I tried but usually passed on.

Every prefecture in Japan is known for some type of delicacy. In my home city of Sapporo, the seafood is the freshest in the world and their ramen (not the 10 cent stuff you buy in the supermarkets) was delicious. I was truly amazed at how great the chefs would cook Italian and Mexican food too!

Each country in the world has their own way of doing things and Japan is no exception. It took some time to adjust to certain customs but I had to remember I was a visitor in their world. Here are a few examples of different customs in Japan.

- They like to bow to each other instead of shaking hands.
- In our country we like to hug and kiss our friends and family sometimes. You rarely ever see this in Japan. One of my favorite things to do was hug my teammates just to see how uncomfortable they would get!
- In the eastern part of Japan, you would stand on the right side of the escalator and let people pass on the left. In the western part of Japan it was the opposite. I always messed that one up.
- When you are standing in line for something, the person behind you would be right on top of you invading your personal space.

- You must cram as many people as you can into an elevator or subway train. Even if there is no space, somebody will try to squeeze in. I was not a huge fan of that.
- If you are out to dinner, the younger person at the table always pours the drink for the older person next to him.
- You say good morning in Japanese the first time you see someone during the day no matter what time it is.
- If you would like the waiter or waitress's attention in a restaurant, you would yell, "Excuse me" in Japanese fairly loudly and they will come running over. Try doing that in the United States and see what happens!
- They drive on the left side of the street. I was happy I did not have a car there!
- In the bottom of the 5th inning of every game there is a 10-minute break. I did not know that in my first outing and found myself on the field with cheerleaders doing the YMCA.
- If there is a controversial call on the field, the umpire will get on a microphone and explain to the crowd what had happened. I found this very amusing but smart because I believe it raises awareness and helps people understand the game.

These are just a few examples but there are many others. They all become second nature over time.

Like I said before, I was lucky enough to have an interpreter when I was with my team. He really helped bridge the gap when there were baseball and cultural questions that needed to be answered. My most important jobs were to help my teammates create a winning atmosphere and give my team a chance to win every time I stepped on the pitchers mound. With the support of many fans, we made it to the playoffs all three years I was there, and made it to the Japan Series twice.

It really shows that baseball is truly an international language. You can bring in people from all over the world and put them on a baseball diamond and they know exactly what to do.

I have found that I have a greater respect for the many foreign players that play baseball in our great country. They have to adjust to our customs and language the same way I had to in Japan and most of them do it without an interpreter! My experience in Japan has helped me grow as a baseball player but more importantly as a person. I am grateful for my time there and hope all of you will get a chance to visit the Far East and go to a baseball game.