

Teaching Culture in EFL: Considerations in Course Development

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Abstract

This paper contends that EFL students ought to study *concepts* of culture and alternative viewpoints rather than conventional cultural information. In order to cultivate transferable skills for appreciating and adapting to ‘other’ cultures in work and travel, the most effective strategy is to develop awareness of the location of culture. This paper looks at theories behind development of a course at a Japanese university, including some definitions of culture and conventions of its location. It questions some of these via viewpoints on the relationship between culture and language. Some examples are presented from the course. The conclusion is that EFL students of pre- and intermediate levels can be challenged to explore cultural theories and apply them to both accustomed and new experiences. This in turn may go some way towards avoiding perpetuation of cultural myths and stereotypes.

Key words: course development, culture, EFL, music, semiotics

1. Introduction

...images, gestures, musical sounds, objects and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (Barthes, 1967: 9)

‘Content’ courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are generally agreed to provide a more enriching experience for both teacher and students than ‘language’ courses alone. Targeted cultural content affords an opportunity for authenticity in teaching from experience, can stimulate and inspire students, and fortify both teacher-student and student-student relationships. However, lurking in the conventional pedagogy is the spectre of largely unchallenged assumptions. These assumptions gloss over both the convenient acceptance of discrete ‘national cultures’ and the cultural ‘cast’ of supposedly ‘language-only’ courses. Furthermore, these assumptions can be so difficult to isolate, define and avoid, that they are allowed to perpetuate pernicious stereotypes and myths surrounding the very idea of ‘culture’ as a concept. This is a significant and challenging issue in the increasingly mobile, globalised society faced by today’s young people. This paper looks at some of these assumptions and suggests that EFL is an ideal arena in which to raise student awareness of these assumptions.

This paper pertains generally to ‘culture teaching’ in EFL, and specifically to a course entitled ‘Culture Through Music and Song’ at a Japanese University. Firstly, this paper looks briefly at theories behind course development. Secondly, it presents some definitions of culture and looks

at conventions of its location. Thirdly, it questions some of these conventions by looking at various viewpoints on the relationship between culture and language. This is explored via the topics of L1 acquisition, the arbitrary nature of language, and the reductive nature of language versus reality. Fourthly, it presents some examples from the course mentioned above. It concludes that it is more valuable to study the *concept* of culture and alternative viewpoints than it is to study cultural information per se. It is suggested that in order to cultivate in students the transferable skill of appreciating and adapting to ‘other’ cultures, the most effective strategy is to become aware of customary assumptions, sensitive to the locus of cultural values, and to learn to view ‘home’ culture with a fresh eye.

2. Course Design Theory

In the theory of course design principles, emphasis is laid on student needs (Graves, 1996). These needs include the both the requirements of institutions and the personal aspirations of students (Hutchinson, 1987: 53). Courses aim to fulfill these needs, requirements and aspirations within, and whilst judiciously challenging, the observed constraints of student ability/levels in both scholastic and L2 terms. Ongoing revisions in terms of activities and curriculum are made according to variations in student interests, motivations and abilities emerging both during the course and in year-on-year populations (Basturkmen, 2010: 26). The purposes of such ongoing revisions include re-focusing attention, nurturing skills and addressing perceived shortcomings in both provision and reception of course content (Hutchinson, 1987: 8). Data for the establishment of student needs (as distinct from institutional requirements) may be gathered by enquiry into hopes and motivations, assessing prior knowledge, and soliciting feedback both during and after the course.

According to UNESCO, cultural education is key to international harmony and conflict resolution. In that sense it is increasingly vital in our rapidly globalising and often troubled society. *“An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.”* It *“contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to feel part of one or different communities and to feel part of society at large”* (UNESCO, 2012). In Japan it is institutionally promoted that cross-cultural education should be by experience. In 2008, elementary school guidelines from the Monka-sho (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) for English education targeted *“pupils understand[ing] language and culture experientially”*. In so far as university students’ opportunities for overseas travel, study abroad and homestays are limited, their ‘experience’ is effectively confined to what is possible in the often spartan classrooms in their home country. The challenge for culture teachers is to seek out ways to bring about authentic experiences in as close to a total immersion environment as is possible in such circumstances.

3. Culture Definition and Location

An elementary definition of culture is given as *“the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by ... language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts”* (Zimmerman, 2012). In a popular introduction to cultural studies, *“culture is the ensemble of social practices by which meanings are produced, circulated and exchanged”* (Thwaites, 1994: 1). A text book for ESL students begins by defining culture as *“learned and socially transmitted products shared by the members of a group”* (Kajiura, 2005: 7) and goes on to elaborate on what is meant by ‘products’, ‘socially

transmitted' and 'group'. Fundamentally, culture is usually defined as a system of material and non-material or tangible and intangible signs pointing to the meaning, values, beliefs and so on, in a society. The material or tangible signs consist of visibles such as food, clothing, shelter and products, whereas non-material or intangibles include visible ephemerals such as festivals and other customs, arts, and craft skills and invisibles such as values, beliefs, expectations and such - what Bourdieu calls 'habitus', that is propensities in behavior and thinking. However, when we ask low-to-intermediate level EFL students in a Japanese university to brainstorm what they know about a particular foreign culture, they tend to list the tangible, visible elements. This is only partly because of their limited L2 language ability, and largely because they believe that these *are* the culture.

It is widely held that language and culture are intertwined. Certainly it would be rare to learn a national language without encountering cultural memes. Some may go so far as to say that cultural participation increases in direct proportion to linguistic competence and vice versa. Early anthropologists postulated that languages and their structures were dependent upon the cultural context in which they developed. In the 18th century, Herder proposed that culture and language were so intertwined that distinctions between cultures could be drawn along linguistic boundaries. These theories were based on the beliefs that words determine thoughts and thoughts determine words. Herder's ideas have been equated to nationalism, falling foul of liberal socialist sensitivities, and were always flawed in that they were reductive of intra-national regional diversity and did not allow for active borders or migratory groups. This issue has been further magnified subsequently by developments in economic and social mobility and technology.

Although it is still common for basic texts and courses on world culture to be divided by nation (Bohlman, 2002: 93), the fusion arising from mobility and technology dictates that it is no longer useful or correct, if it ever was, to view human 'culture' in discrete units. In the same way as nature, with its geographical variations, forms a global ecosystem, so culture - traditional or contemporary, home or 'other' - is the social manifestation of human relationship with nature as a whole. As a result, culture varies with geography and climate but is not comprised of discrete entities. In that sense, 'culture' is a universal in that it is derived from how we acknowledge, manage and survive the seasons and human lifecycle. To quote Harris, "*human social life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence*" (Harris, 2001: xv).

Structuralists, such as Saussure in linguistics, Lacan in psychoanalysis, and Levi-Strauss in anthropology, contend that language itself is reductive of reality. This is not simply a matter of lack of vocabulary, for science and technology may coin new terms constantly. It is more a matter of the totality of experience being beyond articulation. Many attempts have been made, in mysticism and the arts, to convey the 'un-nameable', that which cannot be articulated. Tolle (2003) talks of 'signposts' - the visible/articulated signs that all point to the un-nameable. Although Tolle is writing in a spiritual context, his ideas might be applied equally well to ideas of culture - that visible/articulated signposts in the form of tangible cultural products and language all point to the intangible, un-namable aspects 'culture' and habitus. In this sense the study of tangible cultural products such as famous sites, industries, foods, clothing and so on as 'culture' is both shallow and misleading. On one hand it is only scratching the surface and not reaching the true core of culture in terms of values, mores and so on. On the other, it may gloss over commonalities

and, in doing so, gloss over the question of whether the idea of cultures studiable as discrete entities is correct at all. If we accept that, then the nomenclature of distinct cultures is a product simply of the distinction of languages. If, in reality, culture is graded in parallel to the spectrum of nature, then, were it not for (reductive) linguistic differences, there would be no such things as distinct cultures any more than there are distinct regions in nature. In that case we are neither honest nor accurate if we present language and culture as two sides of a national coin to young people in the classroom.

4. Culture and Language

There are, however, some relations between culture and language (L1) that may be particularly relevant in this context of L2 learning, and of teaching culture in L2. They include the initial focus on the tangible and visible in L1 learning, the reductive power of language vs experience, and some contentions as to the arbitrary linguistic nature of taxonomy. By these means we might see how language generates perception, including our judgement of what is 'exotic' or 'taboo', and so develop an awareness of the entrenched structures by which we approach our encounters with both 'the familiar' and 'the new'.

I begin with the some ideas on visual vocabulary - the 'repertoire' if you like of witnessed objects and their taxonomy - to explore how language colours and categorises worldview. Based on various relationships (interaction, integration and/or contingency) between human and material (natural/man-made) worlds, then isolating particular relationships may be spurious and so may be grouping/categorising them - it is a useful, even necessary, but nevertheless misrepresentative attempt to make

order out of chaos. The inclination to do this is bound up in language. According to Kristeva, in anteriority to language is a separation of experiences which are not in fact basally differentiated in the realm of experience. She contends that without language there would be no consciousness of distinct aspects of the world (Kristeva, 1982: 209). By extension then, vocabulary generates our gridded view or taxonomy of the object world. The level of detail corresponds to a threshold of knowledge/understanding or of required utility - expertise pushing the frontier of knowledge of the world generates new names for *things*. At various scales then, the level of sophistication of our language is the level at which we differentiate and distinguish in the world. It is a myth, but nevertheless illustrative, for example, that Eskimos are supposed to have hundreds of words for snow.

As I recall it, my first speech was constructed around nouns; presence or absence of objects (or people) generating the first need to communicate. At this stage even abstract sensations were articulated only in terms of that which could satiate them. A child calls out *more!* or *mama!* or *no!* long before it learns to say that it is thirsty or afraid at being alone or quite warm enough without that blanket. Since we are small, tucked up, have no money and so on, without names for these sensations we can only call for what satiates them, and thus the established nomenclature is inculcated from infancy.

First awareness of letters and words is as objects in themselves and is rooted in objects. When we begin to learn the alphabet - 'building blocks of language' - for reading and writing, the letters are associated with known objects (A is for apple), or objects known through pictures (Q is for queen); the letters themselves may be solid objects (yellow plastic A) or

alphabet blocks. As animals, perhaps we naturally have a greater affinity for objects than for language.

In England since at least 1658, when Comenius published his small book for schools, learning to read has been visually aided by objects or by pictures of objects. In the 17th century, Locke described how a friend glued letters on dice and thus created possibly the first alphabet blocks. Following is the Victory alphabet in use in children's books and toys for the middle part of the 20th century and exhibited in the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, London (cat: Misc 414-1980): A is for Apple, B is for Basket...and so on...Cat, Doll, Egg, Fish, Goat, Hat, Ink, Jelly, Kite, Lamp, Mouse, Net, Orange, Pig, Queen, Rattle, Soldier, Tree, Umbrella, Violin, Watch, Xylophone, Yacht, Zebra. Clearly, early language acquisition is deeply rooted in objects and depicts a labelable, constructible, orderable world. In Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a scheme is proposed for abolishing spoken language all together on the assumption that it is possible to 'speak' only by means of things - people with a lot to say would carry a large bag of things - a tangible vocabulary (Swift, 1985: 230).

It may be possible that through inculcation in early childhood, contributing to the habitus (system of values, dispositions and expectations), that the distinction between 'familiar' and 'exotic' is established. There remain 'ordinary' letters - A is for apple, B is for ball...and so on...Egg, Ink, Jam, Orange - and 'exotic' letters - Kite, Queen, Umbrella, Xylophone, Yacht, Zebra - generating as a fleeting perception, 'ordinary' or 'exotic' qualities in new objects encountered later. Objects peripheral to experience when the alphabet was learned (such as zebra, queen, kite or xylophone) began with letters that thereby remained deemed 'special', 'difficult' or 'exotic'. Apple, egg and orange, on the other hand were known - primitive forms,

habitually consumed – and their initials therefore remain indicators of the ‘everyday’. ‘Exotic’ objects only existed in pictures and so were encountered in a manner once-removed.

Just as language varies geographically, socio-culturally and temporally, so therefore must object vocabularies. Superimposed on general schemes of national language, regional dialect and local pattern, individuals develop their own dialect of object language through experience, education and interaction – *“a personal vocabulary with which they interpret the object world, giving rise to personal aesthetics and values”* (Cummings, 1990). Over time, the gradual accretion of object knowledge through primary or secondary encounters, and public or private experiences, proceeds, closely interwoven with acquisition of vocabulary. The oldest layers eventually compress to form one layer of what is so entrenched it seems to be ‘instinct’.

Consequently everyday language makes the world seem manageable because it can be articulated, to a large part instinctively, but because it seems instinctive it can also make clandestine, reductive presumptions. There are some less reductive languages proposed (we have already mentioned Swift’s, above) but, as a matter of no surprise, they exist only in fantasy. The following examples of Locke and Funes are found in ‘Funes the Memorious’ (Borges, 1964: 87-95): Locke postulated a language in which all things had an individual name – every stone, every branch, every bird would be individually named; Funes proposed to reduce each of his past days to some seventy thousand memories – unsurprisingly he was *“dissuaded from this by ...his awareness that the task was interminable, his awareness that it was useless”*. He also worked towards an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers, calling 7,013 and 7,014 for

example ‘Maximo Perez’ and ‘The Railroad’ respectively. Such languages or number systems are of course impractical – their vocabularies would be too huge – but would perhaps more faithfully reflect the world than the reductive imperative of conventional language, much as would a map of actual size.

Raw experience is formless and remains so as long as it remains unarticulated. Upon articulation we need naming and categorising to COPE (collect, organise, present, evaluate), as museums do, with the plethora of detail. There is a threshold of comprehension required for articulation, and a corresponding limit to comprehension, beyond which an individual cannot articulate. However, like acquisition, articulation is perpetually incomplete. In articulating we discover that what remains to be said also becomes important, like what remains to be collected by a collector (Baudrillard, 1996: 92). It is possible to write without conventional structure – as Joyce, Beckett, Stein and others have demonstrated – but everyday use of language colludes with enabling us to skim over fundamental unknowns. Language cannot admit the un-namable that we are acutely aware of in the background, fundamentally questioning our articulation of experience. Language induces Platonic stoicism, refusing to acknowledge that which does not conform to its systems for naming and classifying things.

5. Case Study

In the course featured below, the above issues closely inform the class tone (Van Manen, 1986) and the treatment of students and materials. The teacher’s approach is that key cultural education will not be found *in* the materials so much as *via* them, through the interactions, thoughts and

ideas that they facilitate or prompt. In this way the course attempts to shift class targets from ‘prescriptive fulfilment of needs-based criteria’ to ‘genuine experience beyond institutional norms’. By institutional I mean both the institution of education and the cultural institution of ethnic and linguistic division. This section provides course description, and brief overviews of student motivations, prior knowledge, final presentation topics and feedback/adjustments.

5.1 Course Overview

Firstly, a brief overview of the course, its broad rationale and a description of current contents: The EFL course ‘Culture Through Music and Song’ was established in 2007 at a Japanese University as an elective option for English- and non-English-majors. As one of the university’s ‘English Lecture’ options, the course has two broad and inter-dependent purposes: to convey content, in this case songs as a medium of U.K. culture(s), and to raise English comprehension levels. Officially, TOEIC 500/Eiken II is required although, in order to accommodate genuinely interested lower-level students, this is not strictly enforced, in the belief that music and songs might facilitate English learning for strugglers. The detailed course outline is published each year in the university syllabus.

Briefly, the course is conducted in the students’ L2 (English) and consists of a series of illustrated, interactive ‘lectures’ with note-taking tasks, interspersed with language activities including singing, surveys, quizzes, and independent research culminating in an individual presentation to class. The lecture series follows a geographical sequence focusing on a series of cities and regions in the U.K. At the beginning of the course, a basic introduction to the theory of culture is given, with emphasis on universalities, the distinction between tangible and intangible, visible and

invisible as sign and signified. Subsequently, throughout the course, every opportunity is taken to consider links between sign and signified and to draw comparisons with (home) culture in Japan or other knowledge. In conjunction with the syllabus activities the course presents an opportunity for students to interact with each other and a native British English speaker (the teacher) in English, affording both linguistic and intercultural practical experiences. The small class size enables both formal and informal, group and one-to-one interactions.

Provided, as it is, by the Department of Literature, the main focus of this course is the lyrics of contemporary and traditional popular song, however, the approach and extension activities are more eclectic. Songs are not the only materials, but form the core materials linking to other modes of study. Songs are known to be a useful tool in language teaching: they provide a change from 'book work' for both teachers and students, at the same time presenting both pleasure and content and, due to neurological effects, break down affective barriers to learning and to student-student and student-teacher relations (Greenland, 2009). The songs in the course repertoire are selected for their sense of place and associated cultural content and links. The songs make direct local references or famously 'belong' to a particular local community. However, the utility of songs is greater than this: since songs constitute a sensory experience, students can carry them in mind as a fully assimilated by-product of language study.

The perceived utility of songs of this type is further based on the belief that, in addition to their sensory aesthetic appeal, their lyrics facilitate the understanding of social, historical or geographical topics, expressing the human relationship with landscape and belonging. They are well suited to

visual supplementation in the form of maps, landscape art and photography, and tangible cultural objects. Given the typical L2 classroom environment and circumstances - geographical distance from target culture (C2) and from its authentic material environment - music and song provide a virtual, multi-dimensional authenticity available memetically to learners, whatever their life-experience, skills and motivations.

As well as listening to songs and singing, the course attempts to maximise multi-sensory extensions. Students are encouraged to practice drawing related maps, are introduced to visual artists and can handle artefacts; they are study recipes of local foods, which they can try to make at home. The geographical repertoire attempts to introduce a variety of musical genres, at the same time linking with what students already know. For example, in the Manchester unit, three versions of 'Dirty Old Town' are contrasted - the original by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, The Pogues' version, and our own class chorus' version. The song is discussed and compared to Japanese songs such as 'Kono Machi' (This Town) by Takaishi Tomoya and others. The song 'Matchstalk Men & Matchstalk Cats and Dogs' (Coleman), is presented, illustrated by Mitchell & Kenyon's 1901 film footage of factory workers and by L. S. Lowry's football painting 'Going to the Match'. Students have a chance to discuss their knowledge of art and soccer. They try on old wooden factory clogs and compare them to other footwear including football boots and Japanese geta. At all times students are encouraged to compare, contrast and draw parallels with their existing knowledge of Japan and elsewhere and to share these perceived links through written or spoken language, gestures, pictures, music and artefacts. Such linkage aims to provide 'something for everyone' and multisensory mnemonics by incorporating old and new, Japanese and English, art and sport, sound, visuals, objects

and so on.

5.2 Motivations

In line with course design principles outlined above the course starts by investigating what students aspire to learning and what they already know. The following sections briefly describe student motivations and prior knowledge.

Students discuss in groups and write individual open comment sheets regarding their views on the utility and purpose of studying culture. A quick content analysis on extracted themes indicates their motivations. Following is a typical sample from one year (n=29) in numeric order of frequency: Studying other cultures is: useful (19), necessary (9), important (5), interesting (4), enjoyable (4) ...for the following reasons: to facilitate/enrich recreational travel (12); to make foreign friends/acquaintances (9); to increase my knowledge e.g. history (6); to understand different ways of thinking e.g. timekeeping (5); to prevent embarrassment (4); to participate in global society (4); to inform my view of Japan (2); to enrich language study (2); because I want to live abroad (2); in case of war (1).

Set as this elective course is in a curriculum that includes other 'English lecture' (L2) electives and compulsory English communication courses, ostensibly the students elect to study this course for its content. In reality some may perceive it as an appealing route to credits, some keen to speed their credit acquisitions in first and sophomore years, others having not attained credits expected elsewhere. This, along with the broad swathe of majors (students from all departments are eligible, including Buddhism, History, English, Literature, Sociology, Public Policy, Psychology and Education) makes for a multifarious student population in terms of

motivations, scholastic abilities and English levels. However, there do appear to be genuine, thoughtful motivations and an awareness that cultural knowledge is valuable for a variety of clearly considered reasons.

5.3 Bridging

In order to both enable and stimulate bridging from prior knowledge (enable the teacher and stimulate the students), pre-tests and surveys are conducted at the start of the course and before each new section as appropriate. Over a number of years, several different activities have been undertaken to ascertain student prior knowledge of U.K. culture. Samples of results are presented below as a sketch of student experience prior to the course.

Icons of England: English Heritage is a U.K. Government advisory body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Its 'Icons of England' project, which ran until 2011, invited the public to nominate 'cherished' cultural products of England. The icons gathered by the project are presented to students as a list. Students are invited to mark each icon according to its familiarity: whether they have never heard of it (0); merely heard of it (but have little knowledge of it) (1); or know something about it (having visited or studied it) (2). In a typical year (n= 29), of the 74 listed items, 11 scored over 29 (an average score of 1 per student) as follows: Alice in Wonderland (47); Cricket (47); Cup of Tea (47); Rugby (43); Cheddar Cheese (42); Big Ben (39); Fish and Chips (38); Pub (35); Tower of London (32); Phone Box (31); Oxford English Dictionary (29). The total score for 74 icons was 958.

Artists and Tracks: Students interview each other to find out what music artists, bands and tracks they know. There is no prompting list. They find

this activity challenging, not least because they rarely know whether western artists are from U.K., U.S.A. and so on: By far the most common responses are The Beatles, Queen, Oasis and Elton John, with Jamiroquai, Craig David, and Radiohead in the second tranche. The most commonly listed songs are The Beatles' 'Let It Be', 'Hello Goodbye', 'Yesterday', 'Imagine', 'Hey Jude', with a second tranche of far lower frequency including 'London Bridge is Falling Down' (trad.) and 'Don't Stop Me Now' (Queen).

U.K. Brainstorm: Students interview each other to brainstorm what they already know about U.K. There is no prompting list. The following list from a typical year's intake is dominated by celebrities, sport, London, and some curious anachronisms (in no particular order): David Beckham, Harry Potter, Princess Diana, Queen Elizabeth II, Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, Prince William, Margaret Thatcher, Charlie Chaplin, Manchester United, Wimbledon, Olympics, Greenwich Meridian, London fog, roast beef, car production, sandwich, British history, fish and chips, double decker bus, factories, afternoon tea.

Based on the previous discussions we can say that although prior experience or knowledge is primarily visual and concrete entities these can act as sign posts to the cultural habitus and we can make use of those as anchor points for action and/or language. At the same time we strive to maintain awareness that 'experience' takes place in the spaces *between* these anchor points. It is as if the main action is off-stage - the 'experience' takes place invisibly in the senses.

Although the focus of these pre- activities is the target culture, students are encouraged to come up with Japanese equivalents - in this way

students have a reinforced opportunity to bridge from what they already know - a chance to talk and reflect upon their own culture before being introduced to new material. Not only does this help bridge from their existing knowledge but it also introduces a sense of commonality, which in turn facilitates a wider understanding of the concept of culture and the potential benefits of cultural studies.

5.4 Student Presentations

Students are required to make a presentation related to U.K culture to the class. In this way they are able to research their personal enthusiasms and share them with each other, at the same time developing the capacity to talk about them in English. They provide a hand-out for class mates and conduct a question-and-answer session afterwards. They are encouraged to make the presentation multi-sensory by bringing music and/or visuals or objects and to draw comparisons to Japan where appropriate. Some students choose bands; again The Beatles, Queen, Elton John, and Oasis are popular. Others choose other music-related topics - for example 'Rave Culture', 'Music Magazines', 'Music Awards' and 'Radiohead Covers' are some past titles - or specific songs such as 'Siuil a Ruin' (trad.), 'Don't Look Back in Anger' (Oasis), 'Tubthumping' (Chumbawumba), 'Messing About in the River' (Hatch). Over the years students have also made presentations on a range of topics not directly associated with music, for example: 'Literature of the United Kingdom', 'The British Pub', 'British Customs', 'The Ireland Problem', 'British Foods', 'Architecture in Britain', 'The Works of Beatrix Potter', 'The Wars of the Roses', 'Religions of U.K.', 'Superstitions of U.K.' and 'Canal Boat Painting'. Some of these are building on work in other courses.

In selecting and researching presentation topics, considerable individual

guidance and supervision needs to be given. It is a constant challenge to steer students away from duplicating each other and from clichéd approaches. Students typically know little of even very mainstream U.K. pop music, but they can become enthusiastic when made aware of the variety of directions they could pursue. One student was able to make an informative presentation comparing trance music in Japan and U.K. Others have been guided in researching Irish, Scots and Welsh musical and other topics.

In order to boost their perceived choices for presentation topics, the course is adjusted to provide increasingly broad exposure to possibilities. For this purpose, text work and facts have been reduced, and the focus redirected to the most salient, transferable vocabulary, more pictures to aid visual memory, brief listening for lyrics on *lots* of different songs, and more and more active singing (selecting songs with chords that teacher or students can easily play, and giving cloze-test lyric sheets for more complex songs). In this way students receive numerous potential leads that they can follow up independently if they so wish, via the internet, whilst in class we are not confined to a single line of enquiry.

5.5 Feedback and Adjustment

Based on continual teacher observation and both formal and informal student feedback the course is evaluated and adjusted both during and between semesters. In a small group every opportunity is taken to solicit or overhear student comments. There are periodical free-writing open feedback papers given, and each semester the university *anketto* (questionnaire) provides statistically analysed feedback, made available on the university website. It is intended to publish content-analysed feedback in a separate paper. The aim of feedback-related readjustments is to

improve the integrity and scalability of course content with a view to challenging and nurturing student skills at the same time as fulfilling their needs and aspirations. With syllabus adjustments taken as teacher-controllable, ongoing challenges arise from variations in motivation and scholastic character. These include: L2 level, including strategic competence and confidence; limited prior knowledge of C2 (and C1); reception of materials - note-taking, critical thinking; discussion skills in L2 (and L1); attitudes to tests and evaluations (found to be a prime motivator); and erratic attendance leading to gaps in course-acquired foundations.

In the first year of the course, the intended syllabus took a chronological approach, but it soon became clear that the lessons covering modern/contemporary music, planned for later in the semester, held the most appeal for students. In order to accommodate this, in the first semester connections were introduced between old music and modern versions, and in its second incarnation the course was changed to take a wholly geographical approach. As well as switching the focus to modern music throughout, this geographical approach provided a number of other benefits, with students making frequent sketch maps and reviews of historical events.

Various revisions have been made to try to convert learners' initially passive approach to an active one. It was found, for example, that not all students will take notes unless given a work sheet. Since not all their levels of English could accommodate a detailed worksheet, sheets have been gradually refined to a mainly visual format (photos etc), with denoted spaces for particular information items. Students respond well to these and adopt a more active approach to listening and watching out for items of information. A free space is provided on the sheet for those who

can autonomously write more detailed notes, and all are encouraged to use this space for vocabulary and further drawing.

Bridging activities incorporate discussion of parallel Japanese songs. These include drawing comparisons and contrasts between Japanese versions of English songs such as those in the Meiji Shoka repertoire, and the writings of some Japanese artists who have made Japanese lyrics to well known English language songs in several genres. Students compare the landscapes in ‘Song for Ireland’ (Colclough), ‘Shiretoko Ryojou’ (Mori-shige) and ‘Mull of Kintyre’ (McCartney), or the sentiments in ‘Furusato’ (Takano) and ‘Country Roads’ (Denver et al), or ‘Kawa no Nagare’ (Akimoto) and ‘Watching the River Flow’ (Dylan), or the imagery in ‘Sakura’ (Trad.) and Wordsworth’s ‘Daffodils’, or the urban gaze of ‘Kono Machi’ (Takaishi) and ‘Dirty Old Town’ (MacColl). As this list shows, a variety of song sources are incorporated into the course and students are encouraged to introduce further repertoire materials.

6. Conclusion

Language imposes a sense of structure on the world – contending for structure, because it relies upon structure for its own existence. In turn, foreign language study, may be prone to exaggerate sense of difference. One solution is to supplement language study not only with specific cultural information but with more general cultural theory. While language is of course desirable for social communication, one could say that cultural awareness is more important when preparing for the broadening of a young person’s horizons via real international communication. For while language barriers can be overcome, some cultural ignorance and faux pas can cause more serious problems. Cultural awareness is healthy,

we might even say necessary, for good relations and good citizenship. However, it may be less necessary to know specific details than to have a sense of where sensitivities might lie. Sensitivity would be a more useful skill, as a universal ‘currency’, than specific knowledge about one particular culture. For this purpose, it is useful to constantly relate foreign studies to ‘home’ culture and to highlight that which is normally taken for granted.

With culture defined as the ‘social manifestation of the human relationship with nature’, then obvious choices for basic L2 cross-cultural teaching and learning materials are tangibles such as food, clothes and shelter, and visible ephemerals such as seasonal festivals and rites. However it is difficult to provide direct experience of these in the classroom because students are not interacting with these concrete entities. Intangibles, being abstract, at first appear even less accessible. However, sensory experiences are creatable in the classroom and one of the most portable and lasting of those is music. Studied looking both inward (with reference to self and home experience) and outward (as a signifier for sensory information to ‘others’), music can help navigate students through new territories of geography, history and culture, pointing them to universals that enrich not only their knowledge, but also their contemplation of culture as a concept. Beginning with comparing and questioning what they already know they may be enabled to see ‘culture’ as a rich and fascinating construct rather than simply a series differences.

As a teacher, I am aware that the essence of student experience is not in the material aspects of our classes and course, for these act only as signifier and foil. It is in the gaps - between the words, lines of text and sound bytes, in the wanderings of the mind, the space between the physical

world and language, and in the unsaid, in the *immaterial* – that reaction, feeling and sense (the essence of experience) occur. Language and cultural learning need not overtly focus on language or culture per se, but may form part of an introduction to experiences that open the student mind to human universalities.

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