

Language and Cultural Learning Through Student-Generated Photography

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This paper discusses the need for including a strong cultural awareness and instruction component in the curriculum of Communication classes for Japanese students at university. Important training in cultural awareness skills is sometimes lacking in classes or only lightly covered with short reading sections on selected cultural topics. Paying inadequate attention to this essential element of language learning can greatly hinder students in their desire for effective communication with native speakers. This paper presents a brief synopsis and explanation of a course taught in the English 1 Communication Course at Kansai University. The aim of this course is to develop linguistic competence in conjunction with cultural competence through the use of student-generated photographs of their own culture.

Culture and the need to teach it in the second language classroom has been an ongoing debate for many years. Much has been written in favor of and against teaching culture in language courses. As early as 1959, Politzer wrote in *Developing Cultural Understanding through Foreign Language Study*; “If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning” (Politzer, 1959: 100-101). More recently, Bennet added to this sentiment by strongly stating, “The person who learns language without learning culture, risks becoming a fluent fool” (Bennet, Bennet and Allen, 2003: 237). In this age of “internationalization” and “globalization” I side with the proponents of the strong need for including a strong cultural component in the language curriculum. As language educators, we must help equip our students not only with linguistic competence but also the intercultural competence they require to effectively and confidently live and work in an increasingly multi-cultural world. Without an understanding of the cultural context of the language they are studying, our students cannot truly or fully grasp the meaning of what they are studying. True communicative competence must be seen as incomplete unless it honestly includes instruction in true cultural competence.

How then, should the study of Culture be incorporated in the curriculum? In the ESL context, observing and learning culture is a daily opportunity. Foreign students witness and interact with the native culture in their home stays and dormitories, while shopping and eating, in daily activities and with newfound native English speaking friends. Students in an EFL context, such as Japan, are in a much different situation. Other than the usual, once a week English classes, EFL students have very few opportunities to interact with foreigners and the culture of the language that they are studying. Many textbooks on the market and in use in EFL classrooms present the target language culture through short discourses on topics such as geography, sports, holidays and customs. Though perhaps somewhat interesting, in a surface manner, these small tidbits of culture could be seen as a rather passive and ineffective approach to learning culture. In addition, as the reality of the EFL classroom is often something in the order of perhaps one native speaker (teacher) and twenty to forty non-native speakers (students), most interaction in the classroom is non-native speakers interacting with fellow non-native speakers in pair and small group work. This is decidedly unsatisfactory as non-native students are unaware and unprepared to notice and correct the culturally incorrect responses and reactions from their partners. How then should these students learn the culture and best prepare themselves to properly interact with native speakers?

The task of learning “how to learn a culture” is a skill that needs training to accomplish. As language and culture are intimately entwined, we have all learned our native cultures in the much the same way as we have learned our native tongues. In *Second Language Theories*, Mitchell and Myles argued that “Language and Culture are not separate but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other” (Mitchell and Myles, 2004: 235). As children, we listened and observed and almost subconsciously picked up the cultural nuances and appropriate responses that make up the unique traits of our home cultures. Most of us are unaware of the how or why members of our culture say and do what seems to just “come naturally”. Most westerners, for example, would be hard pressed to explain why they shake hands or use certain gestures and expressions in certain situations. Most people in all cultures just “take for granted” the myriad of culturally specific acts and expressions that they use in their daily lives. Likewise, most people have taken for granted the process and skills of cultural learning they acquired in their childhoods. Therefore, one of the major tasks confronting second language teachers is to help our students to relearn and sharpen these dormant skills that have once again become necessary in the study of a foreign language and culture.

So, as the students in the EFL context have very limited opportunities to observe and

interact with the foreign culture, the obvious solution then, should be for the students to practice cultural observation and learning through their own native culture. Louise Damen, in *Culture Learning* stated, "Learning how to learn about a new culture is the primary skill needed for effective intercultural communication" (Damen, 1987). This is the essential first step that is missing from most approaches to cultural instruction in classrooms today. However, by using the EFL classroom as a sort of "laboratory" for observing, analyzing and discussing their own native culture, students will develop the necessary skills to observe and analyze the culture of the language they are studying. In the course of learning about their own cultural contexts, students will develop a deeper understanding of themselves individually and as a national group and be able to more adequately understand and explain themselves in a foreign setting. This hypothesis is supported by Tomalin and Stempleski in *Cultural Awareness*. "Cultural awareness encompasses three qualities; Awareness of one's own culturally induced behavior. Awareness of the culturally induced behavior of others. Ability to explain one's own cultural standpoint" (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993: 5). In short, and again from Ms. Damen, "An important first step in developing cross cultural awareness and inter cultural communicative skills is to know yourself" (Damen, 1987).

During my years as an EFL teacher in Japan, my students and I were often frustrated and even bored with the standardized textbooks and the "cultural vignettes" they provided. In searching for a way to provide a curriculum that was interesting, relevant, motivating and culturally instructive, I came upon the idea of incorporating student-generated photographs into the class work. After years of refining through classroom experience and the helpful feedback of my students I believe the result is an effective language-learning curriculum that develops self-awareness and cultural learning skills in conjunction with linguistic competence.

This photo based course is designed for first year university students in Japan. At the beginning of the course, the students and the teacher use simple and inexpensive disposable cameras to photograph six to eight common cultural themes. The topics and number may vary but usually have included some of the following: the student's house, room, family, best friend, hobby, problem, something they want and something they consider to be typically Japanese. These cultural topics are, I believe, areas of common interest to the students and also are topics they are likely to discuss with their peers in the target culture. I chose the topics for their familiarity and potential for a wide range of English language and cultural study. There is no required text for the course. The students create their own personal texts through their photos, drawings, writings and handouts provided by the teacher.

In the course of the first semester, the students photograph their topics and focus on

learning and using the vocabulary and structures necessary to discuss their photos. Generally, the students have an adequate core English ability from their previous six years of English study to develop conversations on the topics. The length of the term allows for about two lessons per photo topic. In pairs or small and large groups, the students develop vocabulary lists, create dialogs and work on exercises in grammatical usage. Other lessons involving visualizations, role-play, drawing, surveys and listening and writing exercises help implant what they are learning. Potential areas of language study in the first semester could be:

<u>Photo</u>	<u>Language</u>
1. <u>Best friend</u>	Physical descriptions Personality descriptions Arranging to meet Telling time Speaking on the telephone Emailing Vocabulary
2. <u>House</u>	Physical description, style and design Giving directions Asking for directions Vocabulary
3. <u>Room</u>	Dimensions Physical description, style and design Prepositions Vocabulary
4. <u>Problem</u>	Modal verbs for advice Asking for advice Giving advice Vocabulary
5. <u>Hobby</u>	Adverbs of frequency Gerunds and infinitives

Vocabulary

6. <u>Something</u>	Physical description
<u>you want</u>	Gerunds and infinitives
	Shopping
	Money and Numbers
	Vocabulary

In the second half of the school year, the students have their photos returned to them one at a time. Whereas the course work in the first semester is based on developing vocabulary and grammar skills, the second semester emphasizes discussions of the photos and work on self-awareness of personal culture and the target culture. As the topics in the second semester are the same as the first semester, the photos, the course has built in recycling of material. As the students begin receiving their photographs and taking part in conversations on them they begin the process of observing their own personal cultures as well as those of their classmates. They notice similarities and differences and through classroom discussions and reflective writings they are then revisiting those dormant skills of cultural observation and awareness. The students are encouraged to take their observations and create personal and group theories on their own native culture. This then, is that so important first step that is missing in most cultural instruction: the opportunity to develop awareness of one's own culture. The fact that the teacher also shares his or her photos on the same topics is also very important. This provides the students with an opportunity to apply the same skills they have used to analyze and comment on their cultural components to those of the teacher, which is step two of Tomalin and Stempleski's three qualities of Cultural Awareness. In addition, the reality of the teacher showing and talking about photos from his/her life has a strong reassuring effect on the students. It models an essential openness and honesty based on trust and helps create a classroom community of which the teacher is a part. In addition, the presentation of the photos does not occur until the second semester and by then the students and teacher have been working together for over three months. The benefit of having this time together before "exposing" themselves is noted in R. Michael Paiges's *On the nature of Inter cultural Experiences and Inter cultural Education*, "Learning activities which require a considerable degree of personal disclosure should come later in the sequence, after less challenging activities have been used and when an atmosphere of trust and comfort has been established in the learning group" (Paige, 1993: 2).

Potential areas of Cultural study in the second semester could be:

<u>Photo</u>	<u>Culture</u>
1. <u>Best friend</u>	Friendship Dating Marriage Intercultural Relationships Stereotypes Fashion Cultural similarities and differences.
2. <u>House</u>	Neighborhoods and neighbors Architectural styles Commuting/ transportation Cultural similarities and differences.
3. <u>Room</u>	Styles and design Privacy-Space Families, Living alone/with family Cultural similarities and differences.
4. <u>Problem</u>	Sharing problems or keeping to yourself Cultural similarities and differences.
5. <u>Hobby</u>	Culture of Sports and Martial arts Free time and leisure Cultural similarities and differences.
6. <u>Something you want</u>	Affluent/poor Commercialism-consumerism Money-budgets Cultural differences and similarities.

I believe that the use of student-generated photographs not only provides the students with

an opportunity for cultural-learning, they also provide a concrete learning tool for linguistic competency that is both relevant and motivating. Cognitive research in Second Language Acquisition has shown the effective connection between relevancy and learning. H. Douglas Brown summarized David Ausbel's cognitive theory as "learning takes place in the human organism through meaningful process of relating new events or items to previously existing cognitive pegs" (H. Douglas Brown, 1980: 65). The students in this photo based curriculum have just such an opportunity as they are learning new language which can be directly connected to the "existing cognitive pegs" of their own personal photographs. In *"The Tapestry of Language Learning"*, Scarella and Oxford define motivation as; "Interest based on background knowledge and experience and relevance" (Scarella and Oxford, 1992). The personal photographs taken by the students in this course hold an obvious and inherent relevancy for them and the motivation which accompanies them is very strong as they are intimately connected with the student's "background knowledge and experience." If one accepts the obvious connection between relevancy and motivation then it should be clear that using student-generated photography is much more effective than exercises that are connected with some imaginary characters found in many generic textbooks.

"By teaching a language... one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly" (McCleod, 1976: 212). But should the instruction of culture just be a by-product of language instruction? I think not. Active cultural instruction must be an integral part of the EFL curriculum. Students need to more deeply understand the cultural meanings and implications of the language they are attempting to use. But before one can attempt to understand a foreign culture one must first be equipped with the proper cultural awareness skills. With the limited opportunities for EFL students to interact with a foreign culture, the study of their own culture is undoubtedly the best way to develop these tools. Through the use of student-generated photographs, students have the opportunity to re-learn these observational and awareness skills and develop the language they need to be effective participants in an intercultural setting. According to Straub "What educators should always have in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students' awareness of their own culture, to provide them with some kind of metalanguage to talk about culture and to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross cultural analysis" (Straub, 1999: 2). As the pace of "internationalization" speeds up, we as teachers would be remiss if we did not adequately prepare our students culturally for the challenges they may face in future interactions with people of other cultures. "Before venturing into unknown territories, learners must first become conversant with what it means to be a part of culture, their own culture" (Grove, 1982: 23).

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