

All the Native Speakers
**A Culture Course Syllabus within the Context of the Directives of
Mombusho
(Part I)**

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Overview

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (*Mombusho*) has directed that English language teacher training programs include a course on the cultural background of English. In this way, the students studying to become English language teachers may gain some insight into how and why the language is used by the native speakers, within a cultural context. It then remains up to each program to develop and administer such a course. As this is a recent addition to foreign language curricula, there has thus far been little discussion of how to develop such a course, and examples of syllabuses in use are rare.

This two-part article presents a course description, procedure, teaching methods, student and course evaluation, and a syllabus, for a two-semester course developed as part of the language education program, in the Department of English, Faculty of Education at Iwate University. This part (I) will focus on the first-semester syllabus, and Part II (to be published in the subsequent issue) will deal with the syllabus taught in the second semester.

Introduction

If one studies a language, such as English, without gaining an insight into the people who use the language as their own native tongue, it doesn't seem likely that the student can acquire the full value of the language. Without knowing about the people who use English on a daily basis and in a natural way, the language learner can at best hope to learn some of the linguistic rules and memorize the vocabulary. Yet this learner will remain an "outsider" by lacking any insight into the cultural basis for the language.

How can the English student acquire this insight into English as a "living language"? How is it possible when the student is in a classroom so far removed from where the language is used by native speakers?

It then becomes a responsibility of the language teacher to provide the student with

examples of "realistic" cultural settings where the language is being used. These materials should also present diverse examples of cultural contexts, in order that a variety of speakers and their cultural settings are represented.

While the idea of providing the student with a cultural background to the language is an important one, there remains little guidance among many teachers as to what to teach. We consulted language teachers and program administrators at other universities in Japan to find out about their culture course syllabuses. Nearly all reported a dilemma as to what to teach their students, and several requested more guidance from their colleagues at other institutions.

It is for this reason that we present the following syllabus, with the intention of offering some ideas in helping other teachers meet the goals of a background course on culture.

Course Overview

The course, *Comparative Cultural Background of English*, was developed as part of the English Education program. It seeks to meet the directives of *Mombusho* by providing the students with a chance to compare their own Japanese culture with one in which English is being used as a native language (in our case, various aspects of U.S. society are examined).

The course is comprised primarily of 2nd-year students, majoring either in English education, or in elementary education with a minor in English. It is conducted by an American native English speaker who uses only English in class (for the benefit of providing an English atmosphere to the students), although some of the video programs are in Japanese. The 90-minute class meets once a week, for about 12 class-times per semester.

Procedure

The course is conducted as a seminar, rather than as a "straight lecture." Students are expected to take an active part in discussions, using English as their foundation language, contributing their own personal views and ideas. Students keep a weekly journal (in English) of events occurring in the U.S. and in other English-speaking countries. They focus on points that seem culturally important or odd when compared to their own culture. Topics might range from news items to movies or music, and their own observations. They might also choose to write about their own experiences abroad in an English-speaking

country, or those of acquaintances. Many also write about their own impressions of a particular class. This is encouraged, as it provides the teacher with feedback as to the value the lesson might have had for the students. The students spend the first part of each class in small groups discussing their journals (often using English. But as this is not a "conversation class", they may use Japanese when their English-speaking skills fall short of their need to express their thoughts).

Students are not permitted to miss more than three class periods per semester. Final evaluation of each student is based on attendance, class participation, and the weekly journal.

Syllabus

Following is an outline of the class-by-class syllabus of materials and methods used during the first semester of this course. The major themes running through this first semester course are:

- Cross-Cultural Lifestyles
- Cultural Identity
- Cultural Isolation
- Racial and Multicultural Aspects of American Music
- "Artificial" vs. "True" Identity

The thematic content often carries over to the next class, or it may be referenced in a later class. For all the major topics, there are links to similar themes in other classes during the course.

CLASS 1

TOPIC: Introduction of Course / Focus on Cultural News

RATIONALE: To tune-in the students to the character and style of the course, and to give them access (often for the first time) to English-based newspapers and magazines. The students are given guidance (courage) in how to garner cultural impressions from news articles, regardless of whether all the language of the article is understood.

MATERIALS: Course description and syllabus; various English-language books, magazines and newspapers.

ACTIVITIES / DISCUSSION POINTS:

- Students pick an interesting topic from the assorted materials. They discuss the topic

with another student, and compare it with aspects of Japanese culture.

- Description of weekly homework assignments. Students' weekly journals are to include the source (where the item is from, e.g. CNN, movie or book title, etc.), date, a short summary, and their own opinions about it.
- Class Survey. They find out whether the following statement is true or false, by interviewing classmates: "Most people in the class have been to another country."

CLASS 2

TOPIC: Cross-Cultural Lifestyles (I)

RATIONALE: To learn about a person who lives and works in a culture different from his own, and to make comparisons with the students' own experience.

MATERIAL: A video program about the Japanese conductor Seiji Ozawa.

DISCUSSION POINTS: Conflict of Cultures: "conformity" vs. "individuality" in one's cross-cultural lifestyle.

Mr. Ozawa is living & communicating in two different cultures. What problems does he have? What are some advantages to the way he lives? What questions would YOU like to ask him or his family?

In addition, students are asked to make a list of at least 10 image words they each have about the United States. (For example, they might write down Disneyland, guns, Hollywood, NBA, etc.) This list is discussed in groups or as a class. They will make another list at the end of the course. This will give the teacher some indication of how the students' images of the U.S. may have changed by the end of the course, and may provide feedback of general effectiveness of the materials and methods.

CLASS 3

TOPIC: Guns in the U.S.

RATIONALE: To give the students an awareness of the debate of gun control in the U.S., and to provide an historical background of guns as part of U.S. society.

MATERIALS: Handouts of news articles and statistical information, and presentation of video news clips concerning gun violence in the U.S. (e.g. Columbine High School massacre of 1999, etc.), and arguments put forth by the National Rifle Association.

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- Discussion of the 2nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (the Right to Bear Arms), and how it illustrates the early colonists' hostility toward standing armies at the time (i.e. The British Army); the Amendment guaranteed the people's right to have guns.
- Discussion of supporters and opponents of present-day gun control laws and beliefs.
- Comparisons with aspects of Japanese culture, past and present. Focus on the Meiji Restoration and its effect on the samurai culture, especially regarding "sword culture".

CLASS 4

TOPIC: The Midwestern U.S.

RATIONALE: To provide a definition of regional identity, using as example the life and culture of people in the midwestern U.S.

MATERIALS: video *Michener's USA: The Midwest*

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- Program Topics: American football, Kansas State Fair, agriculture, Chicago, architecture, Antioch College, Mark Twain / Hannibal, Missouri, U.S. high school culture, Mississippi River, St. Louis, Missouri
- Early settlers, "the pioneers"; this is discussed in terms of the topic of Guns in the U.S. and their history, presented in Class 3.
- How do the topics in the program compare to Japanese culture? (Comparison with Iwate Prefecture and its agrarian economy.)

CLASS 5

TOPIC: Immigration

RATIONALE: To show the impact of immigration on U.S. society throughout its history.

MATERIALS: Handouts

- U.S. Immigration Statistics
- Immigrant Groups/Nationalities
- Historical Reasons for Immigration
- Racial Distribution Statistics for U.S. and Japan

Video scenes of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- Why would people want to or need to leave their homeland?
- What patterns can you see from the historical statistics?
- Why did the patterns occur?
- How can this be compared to Japanese culture?

CLASS 6

TOPIC: American Music Identity (Note: this will lead into the topic for Class 7)

RATIONALE: To show the effects of popular music on present-day U.S. culture.

MATERIALS: video documentary: *History of Rock n' Roll* Vol. 1

A program about performers, journalists, and song writers who were influential in the formative years of Rock and Roll (1950-1960).

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- Music is a tremendous power in almost every human culture. In the U.S., Rock & Roll brought people from different cultural backgrounds-especially blacks and whites-together. Music transcends boundaries of color, race, culture, and nation.
- Rock & Roll roots, especially in terms of racial origin (white European/Afro-American):
 - gospel (black religious music)
 - jazz
 - country-western
 - blues
 - rhythm and blues
 - Racial aspects illustrated through comparison of Elvis Presley and Little Richard
- How can this be compared to roots of popular music in Japanese culture?

CLASS 7

TOPIC: Racial Aspects of American Music (a continuation from Class 6)

RATIONALE: To provide an historical background of racial attitudes in the U.S., especially concerning intolerance between black and white cultures. Then, to show how rock and roll music affected racial aspects of U.S. society.

MATERIALS: video documentary: *History of Rock n' Roll* Vol. 2 (performers and song writers, with particular emphasis on the racism that pervaded U.S. society and was

manifested in the popular music industry of the early 1960s.)

DISCUSSION POINTS:

Background of racial intolerance in the US:

- black slavery (1619-1860)
- US Civil War (1861-1865)
- freedom for slaves
- White "backlash" reaction, esp. in southern states
- rise of K.K.K. & other white terrorist groups ("white supremacists") against blacks
- racial discrimination (school, housing, buses, restaurants, etc.) officially ended on July 2, 1964
- racial intolerance still remains in U.S. society, despite legislation
- How can this topic be compared to Japanese culture? Are you "racially intolerant"? If so, why? To what extent?

CLASS 8

TOPIC: Cross-Cultural Lifestyles (II) (topic continued from Class 2)

RATIONALE: To consider the lives of several African-Americans who live and work in Japan, and learn about how their own cultures come into contact with the Japanese culture on a daily "living" basis.

MATERIALS: Part 1 of video: *Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan*, produced by Regge Life (shown in three parts during the next three classes).

DISCUSSION POINTS:

key words: prejudice, stereotype, image, realistic understanding

- Whom did you find the most interesting? (Note: the program focuses on several people or families.)
- Would you stay with an Afro-American host family in the U.S.? Why?
- How would your parents react if you married an Afro-American?
- Compare the lifestyles and challenges of those shown in the program with Seiji Ozawa's own way of life and work.

CLASS 9

TOPIC: Cross-Cultural Lifestyles (III)

MATERIALS: Part 2 of video: *Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan*

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- What is "cultural isolation"? Who feels it in the video?
- Would you want to work for Mr. Lee's company? (a gymnastics school in Japan run by an Afro-American)
- Why did Mr. Suzuki (a Brazil-Japanese immigrant) think Japanese was his own family language when he was growing up in Brazil? Did his childhood have any effect on his current attitude, living here in Japan?

(Note: Mr. Suzuki is married to an Afro-American, and they have a son, Keelan. They live in Tokyo.)

- What do you think the Suzuki family life is like?
- Roleplay a chat with Keelan Suzuki. (*Keelan, 15, has found it difficult to define his own identity, and his mother and father have had to deal with the effects of racial prejudice experienced by Keelan, particularly as a child.*)

CLASS 10

TOPIC: Cross-Cultural Lifestyles (IV)

MATERIALS: Part 3 of video: *Struggle and Success: The African-American Experience in Japan*

DISCUSSION POINTS:

"Artificial identity" vs. "true identity". Consolidated discussion including the people seen in the program.

CLASS 11

TOPIC: The Multicultural American Family

RATIONALE: To present an unusual yet effective "family system," comprised of members of two cultural backgrounds that have often been portrayed in U.S. society as intolerant of each other.

MATERIALS: video documentary: *American Families*, a program concerning the Sawtells-a white family in Minnesota with two white children of their own, and several adopted black children. Also, handouts of news articles concerning orphans in Japan, and their stigma in Japanese society.

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- What were the major topics in the program?
- What things could be possible in Japanese culture? What would be impossible? Why?
- What is the meaning of "family" to the Sawtell family?
- What questions would you ask the Sawtell family members?

CLASS 12

TOPIC: *MTV* and Multicultural Aspects of American Music

RATIONALE: To show the impact that American popular music, and in particular *MTV*, is having on other cultures.

This serves as a consolidation of major topics presented during this semester: cultural and multicultural identity, U.S. regions, music in U.S. culture, racial aspects of U.S. society, and artificial identity vs. true identity.

MATERIAL: video documentary: *History of Rock n' Roll: Up From The Underground*

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- The "underground" culture in a society often represents a very creative force that demands to be heard by mainstream society.
- *Hip-hop* is a cultural expression in Black American society, comprising graffiti, dance, rap music, etc. It's a "sensibility" of the culture.
- Creative underground music cultures in the U.S. banged on the door of American society, and *MTV* was formed to convey their expression. This became big business.
- *MTV* developed a so-called "moral conscience" for young people in U.S. society, nurturing awareness of AIDS, voting responsibility, etc.
- Some people feel that *MTV* is threatening world cultures by broadcasting American-based rock & roll music and American-based values to many countries. Dilution of indigent cultures.

In addition, students are asked to make another list of at least 10 image words they

have about the United States. The list is again discussed, and the class compares this list with the one they made at the beginning of the course, in Class 2.

Conclusion

Many might agree that the best way to acquire a foreign language is to take an active part, on a daily basis, in the culture or society in which that language is in common use. But when this desirable situation cannot be provided (for reasons such as distance), the English language teacher here in Japan can still offer examples to the class of how the language is used, in a setting representing natural usage. Media from the culture whose language one is studying can make the language and the culture come alive for the student. These can include examples of print media, as well as video and audio recordings which can offer sights and sounds of various aspects of a culture. When the syllabus is structured around major themes that are significant to that culture, then the language student, remote as he or she may be from the target culture, can still have the opportunity to gain an insight into the people of that culture, and thus the language the people use.

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