

USING ART TO INCORPORATE CULTURE INTO THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This article introduces strategies for enhancing multi-cultural understanding and promoting discussion of culture in the ESL classroom through music and the arts in academic English classrooms. The authors look at some examples on how contemporary song lyrics and art forms, including body language, can be used to not only review language concepts, but to initiate socio-cultural related discussions that encourage cross-cultural learning. The authors share their experiences while drawing on some of the pragmatic approaches they have successfully implemented in their academic programs.

There is a lot of research that supports the idea of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. One reason why it is a good idea to incorporate culture into language learning is that it provides students with intrinsic motivation to study the language by creating a positive learning environment through the integration of language and culture (Engh, 2013). Another reason is that socio-cultural competence enhances linguistic competence and makes it easier for learners to understand the language and become better communicators (Arevalo, 2010). They are better able to understand the subtle differences in intercultural norms between socio-cultural groups and make connections to their own culture,

which in turn helps avoid stereotypes and build stronger relationships with other cultures (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

So why choose art as a medium to introduce culture into the ESL classroom? Much of what happens in a foreign classroom, from interactions at the door to choices of clothing in winter months to discussing interests and dietary preferences, is informed by how we use our five senses to connect to and understand the world around us. We receive imagery, hear sounds, use silence as inspiration, compare cultural tastes, and express our perceptions about colour. It is in this space and through these experiences that we feel the inevitable connection between culture and art. At times, we practise art subconsciously, and at other times, we allow it to take centre stage in our daily expressions. This is precisely why we find it to be not only an essential part of culture that helps in understanding its history, essence and growth, but it is also a useful tool in engaging the students in the classroom.

Having come to Canada from different backgrounds ourselves, we understand the journey of adaptation, internalization, and eventually enjoyment that immigration embodies. We also believe that our identities evolve through living both an individual and a collective journey as a part of learning the customs, culture, and language of the country. Art preserves and shapes our connection to culture, and culture in turn informs and feeds art through the passing of time. As a result, we bring into the classroom our own understandings stemming from smaller communities such as family, school, and friends. For this reason, teaching culture through art is not only relevant but also a realistic and practical way to stream the classroom with the outside world. Considering Howard Gardner (2006) and the significance of multiple intelligences, the inclusion of art and the discussions around it will facilitate a learning environment where the learners feel valuable and confident both as learners and as individuals.

Over the course of our teaching careers, we have used different forms of artistic expression, and have found music, creative writing, and visual art to be the most effective and inspiring to our students. There are several reasons why using music and/or songs may be a good medium for introducing elements of culture or initiating culture-related discussions in the classroom. One reason is that it

contributes to a positive classroom atmosphere, which in turn lowers the affective filter, according to Krashen's theory of second language acquisition; it thereby facilitates learning and makes it more enjoyable, and it also appeals to auditory learners and takes into account not only linguistic intelligence, but musical intelligence and interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence (Engh, 2013).

Moreover, some researchers believe that processing musical structures can lead to enhanced neuro-cognitive functioning because it enables more complex thinking (Engh, 2013; Ayuthaya, 2018). Finally, songs are an authentic source of language (Arevalo, 2010), and they can provide insight into not only the specific slang, idioms, and vocabulary of other cultures but also the habits and customs of different societies and cultures (Ayuthaya, 2018). Furthermore, song lyrics can help improve listening skills, pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary retention especially through repetition and catchy phrases and beats, or what Murphey referred to as "the song stuck in my head phenomenon" (Murphey, 1990).

In general, contemporary songs and music can be used in different ways to introduce and teach culture. Teachers may use specific lyrics of a song to teach aspects of the target language culture such as slang, idioms, values, or beliefs related to specific cultures. For example, the pop song "Life" by Desree from 1998 may be used to introduce superstitions in western culture and invite students to discuss various superstitions in their own cultures. Alternatively, the overall theme of a song may be used to discuss related socio-cultural issues in the students' own cultures. For example, "Another Day" in Paradise by Phil Collins from 1989 or "The A Team" by Ed Sheeran from 2011 may be used to generate discussion about social issues such as homelessness and drug addiction and other socio-cultural problems specific to the students' cultures. "Price tag" by Jessie J from 2011 can be contrasted with Sia's song "Cheap Thrills" from 2016 to get the students to explore the importance of money versus happiness in their respective cultures (the cultural aspect of achievement versus quality of life), and so on.

Another way of bringing cultural discussion into the classroom through music is to play different genres of songs (country/RnB/pop/blues) and have student work in groups to compare and contrast the varied socio-cultural issues discussed in different genres. Also, using music videos where students can see the singers,

their hairstyles, their clothes, as well as their environment, enables them to better understand the culture of the pop music of the time and may generate some interesting discussion about the singers' backgrounds and the culture of people from a particular time period. Music videos from different time periods may be compared and discussed. At more advanced levels of English language teaching, the teacher may ask the students to find an English song with a cultural theme they would like to discuss in class, or they may assign a theme for which students have to find a song to discuss in groups. In a multicultural class, teachers may also ask each student to bring a native song from his/her own country in order to introduce their culture or an aspect of their culture to other classmates in English.

The connection between art and culture can also be expressed through verbal or written language. There are numerous creative activities teachers can use to engage the students in the process of learning about culture. These range from theatre warmup activities, language through dramatic performance, vocabulary games, short stories, and documentaries made by students. One concept that has been researched, compiled, and even illustrated, is the hidden cultural meaning of words. This refers to the untranslatable: words or short phrases we use that carry cultural significance and are often difficult to express using a single word or group of words in other languages. In order to explain what they mean, we may find ourselves miming, storytelling, or drawing, and even then, the meaning may not be as clearly expressed or understood. This is because we attempt to do so from a source language expressing one culture into a target language that expresses another culture (Dickins, 2012).

These words portray the actions, feelings, abstract concepts, or physical description of objects. For instance, *saudade* in Portuguese can be translated into 'longing for a person or place', but at times, the person or object is lost and at times only missed. There are times when the word can describe a profound nostalgic moment of remembering. Another example is the Japanese word *tsundoku* meaning leaving a book unread after purchasing it, but this word also hints at the book being piled up with other unread books one hopes to read one day. Such words, among many others that cannot be explained using one word in English, are explored in Howard Rheingold's book *They Have a Word for it*

(1998) and Guy Deutscher's *Through the Language Glass* (2010); there are also beautifully illustrated books such as Ella Frances Sanders's *Lost in Translation: An Illustrated Compendium of Untranslatable Words from Around the World* (2014).

Discussing these opens doors to learning about other cultures not only for learners, but also for teachers. That is why we found it to be an effective and engaging activity to do in our workshop at TESL Toronto's Spring Conference 2019. The results were fascinating as adult educators engaged in group discussions explaining concepts from their childhood, cultures, and language groups with which they associated.

Another activity that stretches the imagination is using words associated with tangible objects to describe abstract or intangible concepts such as friendship, love, or fame and giving each concept a colour. This creative writing exercise is useful for expanding vocabulary, and as previously discussed, using the five senses to explain how we connect to the world around us. A big part of our perceptions about fame, friendship, or love is informed by our upbringing and acculturation and our personal outlooks on life. In this activity, the students are asked to describe a word, such as love, by stating what it is, what it tastes like, what it sounds like, what it feels like, and by giving it a colour. As it may be inferred, many people see love as red and use soft or emotional words to describe it, but it is interesting to have an occasional student describing it as blue or green and stating, for instance, that it tastes like an apple instead of cotton candy. The students in a lower level class can also benefit from this activity by miming the ideas or looking the word up in a dictionary, of course depending on the teacher's practices and approach to language learning. This brings us to the very important element of colour perception and whether or not it is a universal concept. As Surrallés (2016) argues, while there are some universals in human perception, colour terms are not among them. Cultures define colours differently ranging from positive and negative associations to grouping words into colour categories or describing the colour of things using descriptive words rather than what we know as burgundy or taupe or light blue. In addition, colours express symbolism and values of a culture, which inform how we see the world and what meaning we attach to the objects, food, and concepts around us.

As a result, when learning culture and language through art, we can see the importance of communicating those differences that shape our vision and influence our perception and internalization of art. Why is one genre superior? What do we deem to be aesthetically beautiful? What would we pay for or frame and display in our homes? Do our education systems value art or prefer science? These are all questions that can be discussed in class by looking at an array of artwork ranging from famous paintings and online blogs to magazine advertisements and images of gourmet foods. A group discussion encourages the students to discuss all of the previously mentioned cultural aspects and explain why they feel a certain way about a style, technique, colour, idea, or message in the art form. Students can be given adjectives to describe qualities or flavours, and for the following class, students can be given an assignment to present one form of art from their countries and elaborate on the historical, cultural, or social significance of it. They are also encouraged to express their personal interest or lack thereof.

Undoubtedly, there are limitations in both using art forms and incorporating culture into the ESL classroom that may affect the pace of the class, individual connection to the work, and interpersonal communication. Overall, the students' age groups and levels should be considered, and the assignments should be adjusted accordingly. The biggest limitation we have found is time constraints and finding space to accommodate art and culture-related activities within the academic curriculum. Furthermore, the material used might not be of interest to the students, and there may be a danger of cultural stereotyping or cultural imperialism. It is important to be aware of these limitations and make appropriate changes when required. For example, activities, may be adjusted depending on whether you have a monocultural or multicultural class, and a specific short time could be allotted to do only a part of the activity as a warm-up or wrap-up if class time and subject do not permit. Overall, despite the limitations, incorporating elements of art and creative forms of expression not only facilitate learning about culture, but they create an environment where all opinions are valued and heard.

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