

Lyrics of Place in L2 Cultural Studies

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[Abstract]

This working paper documents theory and practice behind the ongoing development of an L2 elective lecture course, ‘Culture Through Music and Song’, at a Japanese university. After a brief overview of the course and its rationale there follows a discussion of common theories on the study of culture and their implications, for pedagogy in general and for this course in particular. Issues arising over the first five years of the course are discussed, along with efforts made so far to address these issues. With these in mind, the conclusion outlines some ideas for future research and development. The course-leader (the author) has arrived at ‘lyrics of place’ as a rich core material in a flexible, scaleable, multi-sensory syllabus designed for a student population that is highly varied. These variations arise both year-on-year and within each intake, in terms of motivation, interests, prior knowledge, and L2 and scholastic abilities. Observation and student feedback are key features in the continued refinement of this course.

Key words: *culture, EFL, Japan, songs, geography*

‘the best of popular music acts as a tour guide, visiting not only significant places but pertinent times from the past...between the fluidity of melody and a fixity of lyric, a place can be located and remembered’ (Brabazon, 2000: 112)

Introduction

This working paper discusses theory and practice behind an L2 lecture course, ‘Culture Through Music and Song’, at a Japanese university. The first section gives a brief overview of the course and its rationale. The second section discusses the common the-

ories on the study of culture and their implications for pedagogy in general and this course in particular. A third section discusses issues arising in the course, describes efforts made so far to address these issues, and concludes with some ideas for future research and development.

The English lecture course ‘Culture Through Music and Song’ was established in 2007 at a Japanese University as an elective option for English- and non-English-majors. The course is now in its fifth year and continues to evolve. With a view to further refinement of the course, this working paper sets out to revisit pertinent theories and to comment in three areas: the location of culture, pedagogical practice, and course issues and developments. For the purposes of this paper, ‘lyrics of place’ is defined as the words of songs about, or otherwise connected to, locality.

Overview of course and rationale

This first section gives a brief overview of the course and its rationale. ‘Culture Through Music and Song’ is a half-year elective L2 course open to all years and all departments. As one of the university’s ‘English Lecture’ options, the course has two broad and inter-dependent purposes: to convey content, namely songs as a medium of U.K. culture(s), and to raise English comprehension levels. In reality, the course is highly interactive. It presents an opportunity for students to interact with a native English speaker, providing both linguistic and inter-cultural practical experience. Since the class size has been 20-25, the student-teacher interaction afforded by this course so far has been more intimate and intensive than that in compulsory English communication classes, which normally consist of 35-45 students. Officially, TOEIC 500/Eiken II is required, although this is not strictly enforced, in order to accommodate genuinely interested lower-level students, and in the belief that music and songs might facilitate English learning for strugglers.

The course outline is published each year in the university syllabus and some notes on the course’s development are detailed online (Greenland, 2010). Briefly, the course consists of a series of interactive, illustrated content lectures with note-taking tasks, interspersed with language activities including singing, surveys, quizzes and tests, and independent research culminating in an individual presentation to class.

After a pilot semester based on a chronological sequence, the syllabus was redesigned, taking on a geographical format in its second incarnation.

Provided, as it is, by the Department of Literature, a particular focus of this course is the lyrics of contemporary and traditional popular song. Songs are not the only materials, but form the core materials linking to other modes of study. Songs are 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 current course repertoire are carefully 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.

The perceived utility of songs of this type is based on the belief that, in addition to their aesthetic appeal, their lyrics facilitate the understanding of social, historical or geographical topics, expressing the human relationship with landscape and belonging, and are well suited to visual supplementation in the form of maps, landscape art and photography, and tangible cultural products. As well as listening to songs and singing, students practice drawing related maps, are introduced to visual artists such as L.S. Lowry, Joe Scarborough and Anthony Gormley, and can try on wooden factory clogs and handle other artefacts from the teachers collection. They are also given recipes of local foods, which they can try to make at home.

Theories on culture and implications for pedagogy

This second section discusses the common classification of culture and its implications for pedagogy in general and this course in particular.

It is a widely held current wisdom that awareness of culture - traditional and contemporary, home and 'other' - is healthy for both local and global citizenship. After all, culture is the social manifestation of the human relationship with nature, and 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 exist-

tence” (Harris, 2001: xv). According to UNESCO, “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”. Yet, at least at the introductory level, conventional ways of classifying culture may be contributing unintentionally to the perpetual recession of this goal. The reason is that they tend to celebrate uniqueness and, in doing so, focus on ‘difference’.

It was Herder who first suggested that culture was a geographical phenomenon. In the 18th century, Herder observed that cultural distinctions rested on language to the extent that linguistic variations could be used to divide culture into discrete units. Herder’s ideas have been equated to nationalism and have met with disapproval from liberal socialists, however, it is still common for basic texts and courses on world culture, to be divided by nation (Bohlman, 2002: 93).

Historically, music is no exception. Basic guides to world music are customarily divided geographically; Bohlman gives ‘The Rough Guide’ as an example. One reason is doubtless the support and propagation of music by geographically specific institutions — print media, radio, record labels, awards, festivals, tourist boards and so on. Particularly in the field of traditional music, national and regional institutions may provide support and opportunities for performance and dissemination. For all its inevitability, such local organization of commercial, administrative and voluntary bodies may themselves add weight to ideas of local specificity. In the context of English folk music, Harker went so far as to say that institutional support may purposely cultivate perception of difference between social classes and nations (Harker, 1985). How does such a discrete cultural taxonomy relate to pedagogy at a Japanese university? Without deliberate counter-measures it would tend towards being reductive and risk engendering a fascination that reinforces sense of difference.

It may be said that the professional *raison d’être* of an expatriate language teacher is indeed their ‘foreignness’. Employed on account of being a native speaker, they are also able to bring first hand experience of the culture, both tangible and intangible, surrounding the target language (L2). Intangible cultural information would include eti-

quette, mannerisms, body language, attitudes, beliefs and traditions - all very useful to the learner planning to travel or work in a multi-national environment or with an academic, or even casual, interest in L2. But notwithstanding contemporary wisdoms and nomenclature, are educators still in the Victorian business of exoticising? I believe that an awareness of this question ought to continuously inform our academic and intellectual decisions for the classroom.

We must explore and accommodate differences of course (Hofstede, 2001) but, while celebrating and giving experience of diversity, we ought to be looking deliberately to help students identify similarities and universals. There are entrenched obstacles to smooth relations in many fields - academic, social, political, economic, and personal - and at all scales of community - micro (classroom) and macro (global) levels - that might eventually be overcome if they were not continually fortified.

Music is a good place to start the personal process, because regardless of their level of enthusiasm for L2, students are already exposed to music from overseas, and they attach a certain street credibility to expanding their knowledge and experience of it. They look for things they can emotionally relate to in the content, with or without initially profound linguistic insight. Furthermore, they can easily access this music via media that they commonly use daily in L1.

Herder's theories were always flawed in that they were reductive of intra-national regional diversity and did not allow for active borders or migratory groups. The issue has been further magnified by subsequent developments including economic and social mobility and technology. In music, recording technology, the gradual development and internationalization of music industries, and the virtual freedom of movement effected by the internet and associated social media have all contributed to change. All of these developments contribute to the memetic transfer of music (Dawkins, 1989) such that it is absorbed, acculturated and hybridised far beyond its 'origins', a concept which students are already experiencing first-hand.

Although the extraction of meaning from a culture's music may be limited by listeners' "perceptual distance from the culture" (Nettl, 1983), research shows that the emotive-significant criteria of music to Japanese ears are broadly transferable to Western

music. For example, Japanese listeners can accurately identify angry, joyful, and happy musical excerpts from Western samples (Balkwill, 2004). Furthermore, studies have shown that signifiers can be learned and, via these signifiers, linguistic strategic competence may be nurtured. Whereas, initially, students may not distinguish humour, irony, love or sadness in a song, the frequent listening to music from other cultures appears to advance skills of recognition of both mood and lyrical content, developing “a bimusical sensitivity akin to bilingualism” (Wong, 2009).

To add further weight to the potential of music in conveying cultural material, it is also notable that melody has been charged with direct representation of locality in the form of local sounds and landscapes, for example by Vaughan Williams (Connell, 2003: 27), and local speech patterns (Wood, 2002; Diver, 2012). Furthermore, both melody and lyrics convey the ‘emotional style’ (Middleton, 1989: 188) particular to local cultural norms and mores.

Course issues, developments and proposals

This third section discusses issues arising in the course ‘Culture Through Music and Song’. It describes efforts made so far to address these issues, and concludes with some ideas for future research and development.

With culture defined as the ‘social manifestation of the human relationship with nature’, then obvious choices for basic L2 cross-cultural illustrated teaching and learning materials are tangibles such as food, clothes and shelter, and visible ephemerals such as seasonal festivals and rites. These can be photographed or otherwise illustrated, described in concrete vocabulary, and compared/contrasted in highly transferable terms. Typically, the purely intangible elements of music and song provide only occasional light relief. One reason is that it is difficult to fully capture music and song in the conventionally popular visual media of textbook and print. A second reason is that musical diversion from those conventional media tends to be employed ad hoc, to refresh, as and when refreshment is deemed in order. There is a small number of well-researched text books on the Japanese market constructed around song, both as course supplements and whole courses (Hullah, 2012; Rosati, 2012; Bartelen, 2007), however, such texts cannot admit the flexibility found necessary in our course, for the annual

variance in student levels and motivations and the in-term adjustments necessary to nurture very mixed groups.

In accordance with the theory of course design principles, emphasis is laid on student needs (Graves, 1996). These needs include institutional and personal requirements and aspirations (Hutchinson, 1987: 53) and we aim to fulfill them whilst judiciously challenging observed levels of student ability in both scholastic and L2 terms. Ongoing revision of the course (Basturkmen, 2010:26) is made according to the variations in student interests and motivations emerging both during the course and in year-on-year populations. Purposes of ongoing revision include re-focusing attention, nurturing skills and addressing observed shortcomings in both provision and reception of course content (Hutchinson, 1987:8).

Based on continual teacher observation and both formal and informal student feedback the course was evaluated and adjusted both during and between semesters. The details of these evaluations are to be documented in a fuller paper. The aims of readjustments were to improve the integrity and scalability of course content with a view to appropriately challenging and nurturing each student's skills whilst fulfilling their needs and aspirations. With course material adjustments taken as teacher-controllable, ongoing challenges arise from variations in motivation and scholastic character. These include: L2 level, including strategic competence and confidence; 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 the prime motivator); and erratic attendance leading to gaps in course-acquired foundations.

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 the content. In reality some may perceive it as an appealing route to credits, having not attained credits expected elsewhere, or wishing to speed their credit acquisitions in first and sophomore years. 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.

Given the typical L2 classroom environment and circumstances - geographical distance from target culture (C2) and its authentic material environment - music and song provide a virtual, multi-dimensional authenticity that is available memetically to learners, whatever their levels of skill and motivation.

In the first year of the course, the syllabus indicated a chronological approach, but it soon became clear that the lessons covering modern/contemporary music, planned for later in the semester, held an overarching appeal for the registrants. In order to accommodate this, rather than press on regardless (with the fun-palace on the distant horizon), in the first semester constant 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. We revisited maps often, with students gradually becoming able to sketch maps autonomously and in tests, and we were also able to review chronology frequently via events, such as the Industrial Revolution, that had shaped the target topographies.

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

In order to encourage bridging from prior knowledge, pre-tests and surveys were conducted at the start of the course and, increasingly, before each new section as appropriate. Initially, the focus of these pre-activities was the target culture but latterly more Japanese equivalents have been introduced and it is intended to pursue this potential. In this way students had a chance to talk and reflect upon their own culture before being introduced to new material. Not only did this help bridge from students' existing knowledge but it also introduced ideas of universality, which helped in the wider understanding of the concept of culture and the potential benefits of cultural studies. The geographical approach also enabled a smooth incorporation of non-musical prior knowledge

such as movies, celebrities, sightseeing spots, food and football teams.

In selecting presentation topics considerable individual guidance and supervision was given aimed at steering students away from duplicating each other or from clichéd approaches. It was observed that students typically knew little of even the very mainstream of U.K. pop music, but that they were enthusiastic when made aware of the variety of directions they could pursue.

In order to boost their perceived choices for presentation topics, the course was adjusted to increasingly provide broad exposure to possibilities. For this purpose, text work and facts were reduced, and the focus was 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 could easily play, and giving cloze-test lyric sheets for more complex songs). In this way students received numerous leads that they could follow up independently if they so wished, via the internet, whilst in class we were not confined to a single line of enquiry.

The geographical repertoire attempted to introduce a variety of musical genres, at the same time linking with what students already knew. For example, the Liverpool unit allowed for students to sing some well-known Beatles songs whilst also introducing them, via football, to another Merseybeat band in the form of the soccer anthem 'You'll Never Walk Alone' by Gerry and the Pacemakers. This they could sing after a cloze activity and discuss in terms of elementary poetical concepts such as metaphor and contrast. The contemporary star Amy Winehouse was introduced via her cover of Liverpool band The Zutons' song 'Valerie', which Winehouse had more famously covered. Students were guided to compare the two versions of 'Valerie' and to discuss their individual preferences and reasons. For a Manchester unit three versions of 'Dirty Old Town' were contrasted — the original by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, The Pogues' version, and our own class chorus' version. The class also studied the song 'Matchstalk Men & Matchstalk Cats and Dogs', written by Mick Coleman, which linked to Mitchell & Kenyon's 1901 footage of factory workers, and the artist L. S. Lowry's football painting 'Going to the Match'. Drawing these links, convoluted as they may be, aimed to provide 'something for everyone'. Whilst touching on popular presentation

themes such as Oasis (Manchester) and Beatles (Liverpool), detailed coverage of these was left for students' individual research and presentation.

It is planned in the future to extend the bridging activities to incorporate more discussion of parallel Japanese songs. Memos so far include drawing comparisons and contrasts between some of the Japanese versions of English songs such as those in the Meiji Shoka repertoire, and the writings of Japanese folk artists such as Takaishi Tomoya and Nakagawa Goro, both of whom have written Japanese lyrics to well known English language songs in several genres. We may look to compare the landscapes in 'Song for Ireland', 'Shiretoko Ryojou' and 'Mull of Kintyre', or the sentiments in 'Furusato' and 'Country Roads', or 'Kawa no Nagare' and 'Watching the River Flow' (Dylan), or the imagery in 'Sakura' and Wordsworth's 'Daffodils', or the urban gaze of 'Kono Machi' (Takaishi) and 'Dirty Old Town'. As this list shows, it is likely that American songs may be incorporated into these activities, and also that further research and student input will be required for a more modern Japanese repertoire to be included.

Conclusion

The benefits of song in EFL learning have been previously documented. To create a course based around music for L2 language learners might seem rather easy, anticipating eager students, richness of content, and meaningful human interaction in a pleasurable atmosphere, however, to be effective, it requires considerable and ongoing effort and adaptation on the part of both teacher and students. It is hoped that further judiciously chosen songs with lyrics of place, studied looking both inward and outward, will help navigate students through new territories of geography and history and point them to universals that inspire not only their knowledge of cultures, but their contemplation of culture as a concept.

Language learning need not overtly focus on language per se, but may form part of an introduction to sensuous geography that, by bridging from prior knowledge, opens the student mind to universalities in human experience. With its geographical specificity twinned with universality, the concept of 'lyrics of place' is potentially one of culture's most accessible touchstones for the modern L2 learner. These two ideas - extended

geographical reach (universality with local specificity), and potential for bridging (having direct comparisons/basis in existing knowledge) - in conjunction with the motivational power of songs (overcoming affective barriers, creating real social currency etc.), make L2 lyrics of place a most valuable resource for students to broaden their horizons within the confines of the classroom. Further research will focus on student reception and evaluation of specific songs in this context.

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