

# Language and Culture : A Content Based Approach to Raise Cultural Awareness

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## Abstract

This paper will examine university students' long-term motivation to study English in a content-based English class. Japanese students tend to focus simply on improving their English speaking abilities during their studies. However, English learning has the potential to widen the students' view of the world, which is one of the intended purposes of university education. This paper will first describe the background of Extension classes in J. F. Oberlin University. A review of the class "Language and Culture" in spring 2012 will follow together with comments from students' feedback on the class. The paper will conclude with discussion about the possibility of English teaching contributing to university education by helping them become more aware of the world they live in and have a long-term motivation to become independent learners and users of English.

## 概要

本稿は、桜美林大学基盤教育院において英語プログラムが提供している英語選択クラスを題材として、英語学習の長期的動機付けと将来的自立学習促進について、その可能性を論じるものである。スピーキング能力の向上に偏りがちな日本人学生の英語学習動機を、視野を広げるための英語力養成へと展開させる意義を検討し、大学教育における英語プログラムが国際的視野を持つ人材教育を行う必要性について論及する。英語自体を学ぶことを目的とする以上に、英語を道具として使い、さらにさまざまな分野へ興味を広げていく可能性を強調し、大学生らしい学習について考える機会を設けることの重要性とその効果を考察する。

2012年春学期に開講された、エクステンションBクラス「Language & Culture」を具体的対象として取り上げ、学生の視野の広がりや観察できたクラスの様子を、学生の受講動機、クラス活動の様子、学生インタビュー、フィードバック等を通して報告し、大学における英語教育が、学習者に与える発展的影響について報告する。このクラスでは、グ

ローバル化によって引き起こされている国際問題、差別や貧困などの国内外の社会問題などを取り入れ、英語を使用することで世界の広がりを感じられるよう指導することを目指した。知的好奇心を刺激された学生が、英語で自分の意見を言うことができたという成功体験を積み上げることで、国際社会におけるコミュニケーション能力だけでなく、知識欲も高め、自立した学習者へと近づいていくことが出来ると考える。このような教養と発信力を持った国際人を育成する方法の一案としてこの授業を報告する。

## 1. Introduction

One of the main aims of foreign language teaching is to develop the ability to communicate with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As language and culture are closely linked, the teaching of culture has been seen as an integral part of language courses (Byram 1989: 4, Brown 2000: 17.). The idea that foreign language teaching inevitably involves cultural elements has been accepted and is widely spread in the teaching of English. However, the way that language instruction and culture teaching are integrated depends on the goals of the English language program as a whole. Within the framework of general education courses in university, the importance of cultural studies seems to be on the increase. As Byram suggested, “Language learning, it is often said, ‘broadens the horizons’ and if it does, then it has educational significance.” (Byram 1989: 4). In order to make English learning more than a mere survival skill, cultural studies should enhance the understanding and tolerance between people’s domestic and international interests and thus contribute to general education values in an ever shrinking global community where education itself is also unifying through technology and an ever increasing number of students taking the opportunity to study abroad.

This paper will discuss the aim of a content-based class, Language and Culture in the English Language Program (ELP) within the University College of Cornerstone Education in J. F. Oberlin University together with three major awareness topics to be focused on: languages, cultures, and social issues. The feasibility and status of cultural studies within the teaching of English will also be discussed in the pedagogy of English language teaching. Within this content-based framework, the course is expected to raise students’ cultural awareness together with critical views towards the world in which they live as well as develop their language skills in order to have and express their own opinions on these topics and issues. Through cultivating their global cultural outlook, the class can make a significant

contribution to other subject areas in the university education curriculum.

In order to investigate students' motivation to study English and their feedback of the class, two questionnaires, weekly journal writings, and one individual interview were given. Class discussions were monitored by an instructor and also reported by discussion leaders orally and in writing. These comments are summarized or paraphrased by the author and shown in this paper. It will start with a brief description of the ELP course structure in J. F. Oberlin University together with the course description of "Language and Culture". Class procedures will follow with the topics covered in the class. Motivation of the students will then be analyzed and compared with their course feedback to see if any change or development in the students view towards the world can be noted. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion about how this course contributes to the University College of Cornerstone Education.

### **1.1 The English Language Program in J. F. Oberlin University**

The ELP in J. F. Oberlin University provides students with a curriculum in communicative and academic English with an aim to enable students to use English actively. In the freshman year, all students participate in the Eigo Core mandatory courses, where students are intensively trained to improve their general English skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The courses are also designed to provide the freshman students with a foundation to study in an international academic environment, which intends to help them become active and independent learners. In addition to the Eigo Core courses, the ELP offers all students from first to fourth year, a wide range of elective classes. With over 60 classes available in each semester, students can choose classes depending on their own levels, needs, and interests. Overall, the English Language Program aims to help students improve their English language skills in order to communicate confidently with people from a wide diversity of cultures and also to become active and independent learners.

## **2. Language and Culture in the ELP**

In this ELP curriculum framework, an elective class, "Language and Culture" is designed to help students become aware of cultural issues and affairs in the world with an emphasis on developing language skills such as discussion and presentation skills necessary to use English in an international setting. Description of the class is summarized as follows:

This class will introduce students to global issues through in-class activities, discussions, and critical thinking activities. While students may have a basic understanding of globalization, this class will look more specifically at issues that will challenge students' views towards the world they live in while encouraging students to take a global perspective on a variety of topics.

This class is considered as one of the high level ones for students who have completed the intensive Eigo Core courses. In order to build up a foundation in the learning of English language suitable for communication in an increasingly interconnected and competitive international community, this course is expected to boost students' ability by making them more aware of the language and cultural connections that are deeply rooted in English speaking societies and that form a basis for more nuanced communication.

### **2.1 Description of the Students in Spring Semester 2012**

Sixteen students participated in the course consisting of eight male students and eight female students. There were two first year students, seven second year students, two third year students, and five fourth year students. Among them, six students had experience studying English abroad for four to twelve weeks, two students lived outside Japan for over six years, and one student was educated in the United States. The rest of the students went through typical average English education in Japan. Out of these students, even though they had not had any opportunity to study abroad, they were all interested and keen on improving their English ability. All students including two native speakers of other languages had native level fluency in Japanese, but their English level varied from pre-intermediate to native level. It is worth pointing out that all of the students except for one rated their own English speaking ability very low and expressed concerns about it.

### **2.2 Motivation and Needs Analysis**

Partly due to the fact that the students were from different departments and years, students participated in this class with different reasons and motivations. For a couple of students, taking this class was the only way to fulfill their credit requirements because of schedule confinements. Nevertheless, all expressed their own reasons why they decided to take this class. According to a simple questionnaire given in the first class about their motivations to take this course and to study English, interestingly about half of the students took this class to improve their speaking ability; while the other half of the students were more interested in learning about different cultures. Some of the responses noted were summarized as follows:

- I would like to be able to talk about Japan and Japanese culture in English.
- I thought learning about language and culture will be useful in the future.
- Learning about culture in English sounded fun.
- I like English very much but I was not interested in taking TOEIC classes.
- I would like to widen my knowledge and view of the world.
- I am studying about arts in my major, and I would like to discuss it in English.
- I am interested in global issues and social issues, but I have been avoiding discussing those difficult issues in English. I feel I need to try.
- When I studied abroad, I found I had different opinions from other students not only from Europe but also from other Asian countries. Since it was an interesting experience, I would like to know more about other countries and other people.
- I wanted to study something through English rather than to study English itself.
- I wanted to try the high level class.

Although all the students expressed a strong motivation to become fluent speakers of English, those students who showed an interest to widen their view of other cultures seemed to have a stronger sense of need to do this partially based on some of their experiences abroad. Those students who studied abroad before expressed a feeling of frustration when they could not participate in discussions about issues in the world. It was not because they could not express their opinions in English but because they did not have a significant level of awareness on these issues that shocked them. Among the same age group of students from different countries, according to one student, she was almost afraid of being asked, “What do you think?” or “How about in your country?”

I felt frustrated when my classmates asked why Japanese people were not good at speaking English even though they studied hard, but I got even more shocked to realize I had never thought about the issues discussed in the class and so I did not have my own opinions about any issues dealt in the discussion. I knew very little about Japan, and almost nothing about what is happening in the world. I feel the need to know about culture, history, and even about politics of Japan and other countries in order to actively participate in international communication.

As this is exactly what the course aims to have students acquire, specifically a wider point of view, knowing their motivation based on the similar experience and sharing it in the class was effective. After sharing individual motivation to take the course, the class agreed that to be able to speak English requires not only English ability but also thoughts and opinions, which became our shared motivation and the aim of this class.

### 3. Introduction to the Global World

As an introduction and a major basis for the course, to develop the basis of understanding global issues, an excerpt from “If the World Were a Village of 100 People” was used in order to see the world from a wider and deeper point of view. This involves various issues ranging from cultural diversity to social problems. This learning process inevitably involves them considering their own situation as part of a bigger picture. Students are drawn not only to look at global issues but also how they tie into less apparent domestic issues within Japan. The following are the tasks completed in the class:

1. Introduction by the instructor about the world population and poverty;
2. Each student will read “If the World Were a Village of 100 People” and guess the numbers, filling in the blanks (Appendix 1);
3. Students will break into groups and share their ideas in English;
4. Students will compare their own guesses with a completed version (Appendix 1);
5. Vocabulary and expressions are explained and phrases for discussion are introduced by the instructor to enhance English communication;
6. Students will discuss findings and critical issues in a small group and prepare for a class discussion in English;
7. A representative from each group will introduce one interesting finding from their group discussion to the class;
8. Each student will be given a written assignment as a journal entry for homework which leads into further discussion in the next class.

After completing the class discussion, each student will choose a topic they would like to research more and make a presentation.

#### 3.1 Findings and Class Discussions

There are many topics found in this exercise, but the expected topics discussed were: world population, races, religions, languages, wealth and poverty, literacy and education, and freedom and world peace. These categories were made by the instructor and the discussion on each topic was guided accordingly.

##### 3.1.1 World Population

As the birth rate in Japan has long been slowing down and it is a well-known fact that Japan is experiencing a rapidly aging society, students tend to guess the world population is

decreasing. They were surprised when they found that the world population is growing as comes from this sentence, “In one year, 1 person in the village will die, but in the same year, 2 babies will be born, so that at the year's end the number of villagers will be 101.” They seemed to be unfamiliar with the fact that there arise serious issues with regards to resources, food and water because of the rapid increase in world population.

### 3.1.2 Races

59 would be Asian / 14 would be American (North, Central and South) / 14 would be African  
12 would be European / one would be from the South Pacific  
50 would be women, 50 would be men / 30 would be children, 70 would be adults / 70 would be non-Caucasian, 30 would be Caucasian / 90 would be heterosexual, 10 would be homosexual.

None of the students guessed there are more Asians than any other races in the world. The fact that there are four times more Asians than Caucasians and also more non-Caucasians than Caucasian people somehow surprised them.

### 3.1.3 Religions

33 would be Christians / 21 would be Muslims / 15 would be Hindus / 6 would be Buddhists / 5 would be Animists / 6 would believe in other religions / 14 would be without any religion or atheist.

It seemed rather easy for students to guess the largest religion but harder to imagine what kind of powerful place Muslims takes. Moreover, the existence of very few Buddhists went against students' expectations that Buddhism is a widely spread religion. We went further to talk about religions in Japan. Some had negative perceptions about religions in Japan; some think Japanese people are religious in their unique way, for example seeing the temples and shrines packed with people at the particular times of the year. As there seemed a general lack of religion as a concept in daily life for students, this was a difficult topic. Nevertheless, students showed an interest in religious beliefs which seem unfamiliar to them and were keen to learn more.

### 3.1.4 Languages

15 would speak Chinese, Mandarin / 7 would speak English / 6 would speak Hindi / 6 would speak Spanish / 5 would speak Russian / 4 would speak Arabic / 3 would speak Bengali / 3 would speak Portuguese / The other would speak Indonesian, Japanese, German, French, or

some other language.

Students expected English as the major language in the world, so to see twice as many Chinese speakers lead them to consider the reasons behind this fact. It was pointed out that languages of countries like Japan and Germany which are recognized as economically playing important roles do not necessarily have many speakers.

### **3.1.5 Wealth and Poverty**

20 are undernourished / 1 is dying of starvation, while 15 are overweight / Of the wealth in this village, 6 people own 59% (all of them from the United States), 74 people own 39%, and 20 people share the remaining 2% / Of the energy of this village, 20 people consume 80%, and 80 people share the remaining 20% / 20 have no clean, safe water to drink / 56 have access to sanitation.

This part is probably the most difficult part to imagine as what is really happening in the world. Inequality is so huge that poverty becomes an even more shocking fact for students to understand when faced with the clarity of the numbers in front of them.

### **3.1.6 Literacy and Education**

15 adults are illiterate / 1 has a university degree / 7 have computers

Probably because literacy is not a serious problem in Japan with over 95 per cent of students completing high school education, it seemed very difficult for students to surmise that globally, literacy is a big issue. It is pointed out as a positive finding that 7 people having computers has some potential to improve literacy rates.

### **3.1.7 Freedom and World Peace**

If you do not live in fear of death by bombardment, armed attack, landmines, or of rape or kidnapping by armed groups, then you are more fortunate than 20, who do.

If you can speak and act according to your faith and your conscience without harassment, imprisonment, torture or death, then you are more fortunate than 48, who can not.”

These things are made aware to students via the news only in most cases, and not only peace but also individual freedom is so normally accepted in Japan that they could not think of any concrete examples.

### 3.1.8 Globalization and Responsibility

In such a village with so many kinds of people, it would be very important to learn to understand people different from yourself and to accept others as they are.

If you have money in the bank, money in your wallet and spare change somewhere around the house, then you are among the richest 8.

If you can read this message, that means you are probably lucky!

This part gave students interesting insights that many students said they had to appreciate their life. They also talked about intercultural communication is not only fun but also requires a lot of effort, thought, and patience.

## 4. Feedback from the Students

Individual feedback on the task and on the course was made first in writing. Students then shared their findings and opinions in small groups, which was monitored and sometimes facilitated by the instructor. Each group summarized the discussion and reported to the class. Based on these sharing activities, each student prepared three discussion questions with their own opinions and joined the class discussion chaired by the instructor.

### 4.1 Feedback on the Task

Many students commented on this exercise as a shocking one, and confessed the issues in the exercise were never really discussed in their daily life. Some of the noted comments are as follows:

- I felt English was the most important language but I never thought about the reason why English is recognized as a global language. It was an important experience for me to know that there are reasons such as historical, political, economical, and cultural.
- I realized I heard about the topics like globalization or poverty but never thought about those issues. It was very difficult to join discussions on these issues, but it was good eye opener for me to try to have my own opinions and express them.
- I think it really helped me to be aware of our surroundings and to think more about other people.
- It was insightful to see the different points of view towards globalization. I feel those global issues I only knew vaguely about before became more real to me.
- I was shocked to realize it is more difficult to find something positive in this reading exercise than to find something negative. I thought I knew what poverty is but now I

know I do not. I thought I knew about inequality, but it was much more severe than I thought.

It is worth noting every student could participate in these sharing discussions with their own thoughts and opinions. It was also observed that they showed a sincere interest in and carefully listened to each other's comments.

#### **4.2 Feedback on the Course**

After this activity, students were asked to find and bring an article about the particular global issue that interested them for discussion. They also had to pick out one topic and make a presentation based on individual research at the end of the course. Various topics were covered in the discussions and in their presentations. Some students chose English as a global language, several environmental issues such as the global energy crisis, issues of food waste, multinational companies, racial discrimination, intercultural communication, poverty and charity, culture and arts, and globally influential people like Nelson Mandela were also chosen. It was interesting to have such a variety of topics chosen by students based on individual interests, and they, however difficult, tried to show their own thoughts and opinions.

At the end of the course, they were asked to review the course in a questionnaire, in journal writing, and in an interview with the instructor. There seems to be traced developments in students' motivation to study English and to know the world.

- I like English but I never thought about what kind of language English is, how it is used, and for what purposes it is used. Now, I think more carefully about why I am studying English and what I can do and want to do with English. I feel I can face English learning in a more active way. In order to be able to use English effectively, I learned it was important to have thoughts and opinions.
- There is plenty of food, opportunities to be educated, and long-lasting peace in Japan. According to this reading, we are among the wealthiest ten per cent in this world. I think we have an obligation to contribute to a peaceful world by helping the 90 per cent of the world in need.
- Now that I understand how easy life in Japan is and how privileged we are to be in peace, knowing about the world and thinking about what I can do and sharing what I have is really important.
- I thought learning about other countries really helped me take a careful look at Japan. After realizing there are so many people suffering from various issues, I hope I will be

more understanding about those people's feelings and will be able to take some positive action.

- I never felt fear of being in any kind of serious danger in Japan. After reading this, I was scared to imagine what if I was not Japanese. I often hear how unhappy people could be in this country with 30000 people committing suicide every year, but I started to consider that we should be more positive about our lives.
- I could not believe only one person out of 100 can get a university degree, but there is also hope. If 7 people have computers, we could share information so that more people can study to be literate. Computers can make a positive change even in a poor nation.

The students appeared to demonstrate awareness of various issues. They were not only more aware of global problems, but also domestic ones. This awareness seems to have a positive effect by adding different dimensions to their studying of English.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

It seems to me that one of the primary objectives of teaching English in university education is to guide students towards life-long learning. While some students have clear visions for what they wish to attain through their studies, there exists a large proportion of students who know they have the passion to speak English but do not have a clear purpose they wish to fulfill. All students differ in background, motivation, interests, and perspectives. By looking at the world in this way, students can be re-directed to look at the diversity at home. If they become aware of differences that exist everywhere, they will be more competent, well-rounded global citizens, and thus effective users of English. Moreover, if students can find a more specific, achievable motivation in English learning found in a comment "I felt joy when I could express my opinions on difficult issues, and I had joy when my classmates understood my opinions. This motivated me to want to speak more and understand more people," there seems a good chance for them to continue to study with the desire to know more. Furthermore, they can make more positive and deeper connections between English learning and other subjects in university, which can facilitate more active learning and experience. One student comments:

Lots of things in this reading exercise opened my eyes. For some reason, reading and talking about serious world issues in English had a bigger impact and influence than doing so in Japanese. There were so many things I never even noticed and I am glad I

am aware of them even if just a little more than before.

Even though most students came away from the course with a positive outcome, the fact that two students could not complete the course needs to be carefully analyzed in order to make the course more accessible and attainable, and to have more students share some sense of achievement and development. One second-year student withdrew from the course as it seemed too difficult for him after three classes. He felt the other students' English level was too high for him to actively participate in the class. The other was a fourth-year student who dropped out after missing four classes. He felt it was impossible to catch up with the class after he missed the instruction sessions on making a persuasive speech and a visual presentation. Though this course is offered as a high level course, the fact that students from all years with different levels of English skills are mixed in the class needs to be more carefully considered in order to make the syllabus more achievable and to make the course more accessible. While making a speech and a presentation on global issues in English was a positive experience for some students, this could make a discouraging factor for some others. As two first year students, through much struggling, managed to complete the course, it seems possible to make the course accessible and appealing to a wider range of students with a strong motivation and interest in English and cultural studies. Further investigation and research needs to be conducted in order to come up with a more effective syllabus of a content-based class aiming to raise cultural awareness, which can help students improve their English skills while keeping their motivation high.

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**Appendix 1****IF THE WORLD WERE A VILLAGE OF 100 PEOPLE**

More than seven billion people live in the world today. If our world was shrunk to the size of a village of 100 people, what would it look like? Read and guess what number will fill in the blanks.

- 59 would be Asian
- 14 would be American (North, Central and South)
- 14 would be African
- 12 would be European
- 1 would be from the South Pacific
  
- 50 would be women, 50 would be men
- 30 would be children, 70 would be adults.
- 70 would be non-Caucasian, 30 would be Caucasian
- 90 would be heterosexual, 10 would be homosexual
  
- 33 would be Christians
- 21 would be Muslims
- 15 would be Hindus
- 6 would be Buddhists
- 5 would be Animists
- 6 would believe in other religions
- 14 would be without any religion or atheist.
  
- 15 would speak Chinese, Mandarin
- 7 would speak English
- 6 would speak Hindi
- 6 would speak Spanish
- 5 would speak Russian
- 4 would speak Arabic
- 3 would speak Bengali
- 3 would speak Portuguese

The other would speak Indonesian, Japanese, German, French, or some other language.

In such a village with so many kinds of people, it would be very important to learn to understand people different from yourself and to accept others as they are. Of the 100 people in this village:

20 are undernourished

1 is dying of starvation, while 15 are overweight.

Of the wealth in this village, 6 people own 59% (all of them from the United States), 74 people own 39%, and 20 people share the remaining 2%.

Of the energy of this village, 20 people consume 80%, and 80 people share the remaining 20%.

20 have no clean, safe water to drink.

56 have access to sanitation

15 adults are illiterate.

1 has a university degree.

7 have computers.

In one year, 1 person in the village will die, but in the same year, 2 babies will be born, so that at the year's end the number of villagers will be 101.

If you do not live in fear of death by bombardment, armed attack, landmines, or of rape or kidnapping by armed groups, then you are more fortunate than 20, who do.

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