

The World Through Music: Using the Putumayo World Music site to enhance cultural awareness and linguistic use in an EMI classroom¹

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Abstract

Is empathy a necessary part of communicative competence, in both a native or other language? Can exercises be developed to encourage the connection that can lead to empathy, and is developing empathy necessary for healthy global interaction? First year comparative culture students at Aichi University use the Putumayo World Music site as a research tool when learning both research and presentation skills. The classes are taught in English, and by using the Internet, music content and research, intercultural awareness is raised and linguistic skills are developed. At a basic level these exercises address and ameliorate some of the stages of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (2011), and work towards alleviating some of the conscious and unconscious defences students might have towards recognising the value of different cultures. Concurrently, the exercises incidentally work towards raising self-awareness of the students' own culture, particularly at a personal level.

Key words: Intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, empathy, desensitization, schemata, language acquisition, insider status, self awareness, gate keeping.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (Bennett, 1986/2011), there are many defences that students can display towards developing an awareness of their own and other cultures. Bennett states that people who are in a state of denial (the first stage of his model) about the validity or even existence of a variety of cultures do not yet have an "experience of difference". This can be due to a hegemonic outlook where there is no real knowledge of even one's own culture, and can lead those in this state to "dehumanize" those they perceive as being different (p. 1). In a world where 'accidental' drone victims are officially regarded as "bugsplats" (Robinson, 2011: ¶5; Schwartz, 2013: ¶ 15-16), and where many global policies cultivate the existence of "unpeople", that is, people who are 'dispensable' amongst the world's population (Curtis, 2004 in Chomsky and Polk, 2013: 33, Chomsky, 2012; Orwell, 1949 in Chomsky, 2012), activities designed to overcome these defences are sorely needed.

¹ Sullivan, S.L. (2014). The World Through Music: Using the Putumayo World Music site to enhance cultural awareness and linguistic use in an EMI classroom. In M. Ruddick (Ed.), *Working Papers From The Near Language Education Conference 2014*. Niigata: JALT.

Connection (a form of empathy) rather than disconnection, both for Japanese students, and other nationalities, can be encouraged in lessons through what Bennett terms as “Experience of Difference” (2011, p.1). Easing students into this state can be accomplished through exercises which incorporate pre-existing interests and knowledge. This can connect students to other cultures in an accessible, meaningful and non-threatening way, which can lead to a broader and more nuanced view of both themselves and the wider world (Bennett, 2011, p. 3). Music, particularly for university students, is one such interest (discussed further below).

In *simpatico* with this notion of using pre-existing interest and knowledge is the idea well known in TESOL circles of tapping into and opening student schemata, and transferring pre-existing information within into new fields (Widdowson, 1984, p.223; see also Carrel & Eisterhold, 1987; Hadley, 2001, p. 161). This transference usually involves top-down processing skills which, along with encouraging students to use pre-existing knowledge, helps ease the burden of comprehension when lessons are conducted in second or other languages (Carrel & Eisterhold, 1987; Grabe, 2004; Hadley, 2001). In language acquisition literature, this is said to heighten the chances of gaining acquisition (2001). Further to this, music is a strong candidate for encouraging student curiosity. Curiosity is a major component of intrinsic motivation, and students who are intrinsically motivated to study a topic can display a higher level of learner autonomy, which can lead to a greater sense of achievement and success, both for the completion of the task at hand and for course and linguistic goals (Vallerand, 1997, as cited in Dörnyei, 1998, p. 121; Dörnyei, 1998). Some level of familiarity is conducive to new ideas being more readily absorbed and accepted. Keeping in mind the favourable effects of studying content that is music-related, this essay will detail how using the Putumayo World Music website in a general comparative culture course, conducted in English, in Japan, can broaden university students’ cultural knowledge and attitudes, and linguistic knowledge and use.

2. MUSIC WITHIN JAPAN

Within Japan, students have a compulsory nine years of music study (Sonoda, 2014, p. 118). Many continue to play in various types of music clubs (circles) throughout school and into university, and are conversant in much of the jargon, and definitely have knowledge of the musical form, both in a trained and popular sense (2014).

Aside from those who have continued their formal studies, most university students and young adults connect to and love some form of music. In Japan, the popular music tends to be Japanese, Korean and English-lyric pop (de la Torre, 1996-2014). The majority of the foreign music popular among the below 25's (excepting K-Pop) consists of songs sung in English from English dominated countries, particularly the inner circle countries of the U.S., the U.K. and to a lesser degree, Canada (de la Torre, 1996-2014; Kachru, 1985; Billboard, 2014). Students often give these countries as first choices when asked to name foreign countries (though Korea and China top the list) and a form of "neo-colonialism" and "gatekeeping" might be a by-product or a cause of commercial promotion of this music (Pennycook, 1994, as cited in Kachru, 2005, p. 160; Foucault, 1981, as cited in Savignon, 2005, p. 639, see also Kachru, 2005, McKay, 2011).

Naturally, as an outsider with restricted understanding of the wider Japanese community, my perception and knowledge of university student awareness of world music is mostly entrenched in my own experience, research, observances and culture. As a matter of fact, according to the Japan Music Marketing website, once past 25 years of age, the music taste of many Japanese is well-known for its diversity. However, it seems to be a little more limited in the under 25s (de la Torre, 1996-2014) and this is the group this paper concerns itself with. Nonetheless, a foreign teacher in an FLA situation, teaching world music to the students of a world in many ways beyond her own, is definitely taking on the role of a cultural 'gatekeeper', no matter how much autonomy the class has. All teachers of any subject play this role to a degree.

Even so, using the Putumayo site and music does expose students to more than the popular culture endorsed and filtered by the mainstream music industry, which oftentimes promotes and supports a 'sameness' of local and world culture, as suggested in the paragraphs above. At the same time, because the content is music and students need to locate videos – content and media they are receptive towards – learners are potentially more open to appreciating rather than devaluing this difference between music cultures (as implied by Bennett, 2011, p. 2, p. 4).

The Putumayo recording label was established in 1993 with the aim of highlighting music from certain areas of the world, or certain styles of music. Not all musicians on the U.S. label are well known worldwide, or even in their own country. Some music is recent; some goes as far back as the 1930s (Nieset, 2013, June 20). It is a gateway to music styles and sounds from different regions for many listeners (Nieset, 2013). Even though studying music from certain regions might focus on a limited area of culture, it is still a new area for many

students. Once their curiosity is piqued, deeper interaction can be sought (Bennett, 2011, p. 4; Dörnyei, 1998; Taylor, 1976, p. 317). Accordingly, this exercise can be used with students of all countries, including my own, to engage them with knowledge of other nations in a way that is immediate to them (through music), and has relevance to them (through music).

3. PROCESS

First-year comparative culture classes at Aichi University, over a 5 to 7 week period, are allocated/choose a broad area of the world, such as Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, or Latin America (these are some of the categories used by Putumayo). Each album promoted by the website contains samples of its music, and students choose a song from one of the albums from their allocated/chosen area. They then research the artist, and from there, learn more about the history of the performer(s), the style of music, the instruments used, and the countries of origin, amongst other things.

Students prepare a prezi and present their findings to the class in pairs. Classes are ninety minutes and meet once a week. There are usually two presentations per class. The students present the same information twice for maximum potential retention by the audience, to share presenting and technical workloads, and to develop their fluency and automaticity skills. Their work is later used as a scaffold to discuss musical preferences (written), to provide feedback and to develop macro skills. It is also used as a lead-in to their second assignment.

4. RATIONALIZATION: CULTURAL ASPECTS

On March 19, 2014, a Tokyo court ruled that a Ghanaian man suffocated to death due to unlawful measures of restraint employed by Narita airport security guards (Johnson, 2014: ¶1). One key word attached to Johnson's article was 'xenophobia' (2014). Australia, my homeland, also has a history of xenophobia, elements of which are perpetuated today in its asylum seeker policies, and its attempts, at the time of writing, to repeal parts of the racial discrimination act ". . . which [currently] makes it unlawful to "offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate" people based upon their race" (Deen, 2014; Laughland & Davison, 2014; Clark, 2014, ¶2).

Discrimination can be normalized in policies and actions such as the now defunct *White Australia Policy* (Deen, 2014; Shirrefs, 2014, ¶4), and as seen in the behaviour of the Japanese officials at Narita. Reflected societally, within my experience as an instructor, Japanese student ideas about areas unfamiliar to them are well-meaning, but, often

“[c]haracterized by dualistic us/them thinking and . . . frequently accompanied by . . . negative stereotyping.” This can include a usually unintentional “ . . . evolutionary view of cultural development with [their] native culture at the acme . . .” and “[a] tendency towards social/cultural proselytizing of ‘underdeveloped’ cultures,” in terms of countries that are not western or Japan (Bennett, 1986, 2011, p. 3). A quick read of the comments section of any story about asylum or immigration in Australia, and across much of the world, illustrates that these kinds of opinions are not unique to Japan.

4.1 The Power of Music

The world’s music can make cultures more accessible to those leading fairly insular lives. Connection as opposed to difference, or difference which elicits connection, can be explored. The founder of Putumayo, Dan Storper, hopes to encourage people to explore more work by the artists featured. Fans have travelled afar to the sources of origin due to the impact of the music on their lives (Nieset, 2013, June 20). Similarly, students using the Putumayo site to complete this project have mentioned researching musicians, or aspects of music or regions, beyond assigned requirements, and valuing learning about areas of the world they hadn’t previously considered (M. Iwasaki, personal communication, January 7, 2014). Culturally, this can tie in with stage IV of Bennett’s model, “Acceptance of Difference” (2011, pp. 6-7) which will be explored in the following paragraph.

Earlier in Bennett’s model is the suggestion that to develop students’ comfort with understanding that their culture can coexist with others, it is important to initially “[p]rovide reassurance and information about similarities” (p. 4), and to concentrate initially on “objective culture” such as music (p. 3). Using music to broaden students’ cultural understanding of the world also helps them to understand their own personal and local culture better as well, as they reflect on their own experience, likes and dislikes. This raises self-awareness. For example, a student in a 2013 class observed that she rarely listened to female vocalists, but she enjoyed the voice of a singer featured in another group’s presentation so much that she sought out additional tracks. Further comments on other videos showed that she continued to enjoy female vocalists from the Putumayo website (M. Nishikawa, personal communication, 2013, November 5). These reactions were garnered from the Edmodo interface, where the week’s presenters posted videos featured in their presentations and students were required to comment. From this writer’s point of view, Nishikawa’s words show that her individual world was broadening as she reassessed her personal identity (could she still define herself as someone who did not listen to female vocalists?), and she was also

widening her scope of interaction with both gender and music as a direct result of exposure to new information and cultures. She related to this piece of music from the perspective of an 'insider' rather than an 'outsider'. The music was not produced by her culture, and the lyrics were neither in Japanese or English, but she assessed it from the point of view of her personal opinion and reaction to the music, and therefore, she adapted so that this representation of a culture separate from her own (Gnahore is from the Ivory Coast) can be included within her current perception of self and her own culture, particularly the music she enjoys within that culture.

The somewhat ties in with the fourth and fifth stages of Bennett's six stage model, "Acceptance of Difference" and "Adaption to Difference". Both stages involve recognising the diversity not only in another culture, but in one's own culture, and also cover, particularly in the fifth stage, "self-reflexive consciousness" which, among other things, can see a learner changing behaviour in order to problem-solve (2011, pp. 8-9). Nishikawa listened to a song by a female vocalist (Dobet Gnahore) and consciously realised she was doing so. This was a form of conflict, because she did not view herself as someone who listened to female vocalists, so she needed to reassess (problem solve) the situation, and adapt. Additionally, she did not hold her own culture as the 'acme' of 'civilization', and nor its opposite. This 'slice' of material culture was valued for its difference, and therefore any defenses that might have been held against cultural awareness were lessened. Obviously, these presentation classes did not delve into the deeper aspects of developing cultural awareness that Bennett's model deals with, but enough "Experience of Difference" was encountered in this case that the student's self-knowledge and broader knowledge of other cultures was considered. This was an 'experience of difference' that led to a societal (female singers are worth listening to) and self perception shift (I now listen to some female singers).

Building upon their knowledge and deepening curiosity and connection can encourage both increased FLA (this concept is expanded in more detail in the next section) and a more aware stance towards cultures separate from the majority culture (Hadley, 2001; Bennett, 1986, 2011). Another example is that the students in 2013 learnt that Hamza El Din, a world famous Egyptian oud player, studied the biwa (a Japanese instrument very similar to the oud) in the 80s and lectured in Nubian music at Tokyo University. He met his wife in Japan (Lusk, 2008). The biwa is a unique Japanese stringed instrument, but it is also related to the other stringed instruments of the world, such as the oud, the lute, and the pipa, and understanding this shared musical element can foster cultural awareness.

Another group were thrilled when a Brazilian artist included snippets of Japanese in his song (Jorge, 2012, *Japonesa*; Pre-seminar 1, period 3, private correspondence, 2013, November 12-19). Difference is celebrated, but similarities are also noted. This somewhat ties into “[c]ultural category boundaries becom[ing] more flexible and permeable . . .” (Bennett, 2011, p. 9, “Adaptation to Difference”). In addition to studying certain aspects of non-Japanese cultures, the students were excited to find that Japan also has a cultural influence on the wider world (A. Sugiura, November 19, 2013, personal communication). Returning to the introduction, knowledge and discovery of this certainly works towards mitigating defensiveness against developing awareness, and valuing differences of cultures as the students take note of connections (Bennett, 2011).

5. LINGUISTIC ADVANTAGES

Music, because it appeals to students, encourages a weak affective filter, as defined by Krashen (Schoepp, 1991). That is, it opens them up to the language of instruction – English - which spirals into further interest in the topic (Taylor, 1976, p. 317). That interest can expand beyond music. Furthermore, a strong grasp of English is not needed for enjoying music, as it has a commonality of existence amongst most cultures. Therefore, both practical and cultural language skills can increase as students need to find the necessary language to express themselves, need to learn paraphrasing skills so that their classmates can follow their content, need to develop interactive quizzes to accompany their presentations, and later need to listen to the videos other groups have chosen and write their opinion about the music or song. Some exercises called for the development of creative skills as students imagined and wrote scenarios influenced by their reactions to the music.

S. Toyama wrote, also in reaction to Dobet Gnahore’s song, “. . . when I listened to her song, I was fascinated by her voice . . . because she was singing bass and had a sense of stability. I became composed then. Of course, her soprano is very beautiful too. . . .” (personal communication, November 5, 2013). The student went on to write that the tenderness of the voice seemed to indicate that the song involved the protagonist thinking about a loved one. As stated in the section on music in Japan in this essay, the student was able to connect with the song technically through her pre-existing knowledge of musical composition (her mention of the facets of voice seems to indicate this), and was able to extrapolate that knowledge into a technical review, and to further extend that to a form of analysis and creativity about the intent behind the song’s feeling. That is, she was able to broaden her knowledge base (and use), which could then be adopted by her schemata, which, as stated in the introduction, could

then be transferred from ‘. . . one individual world to another’ (Widdowson, 1984, p. 223, see also Carrel & Eisterhold, 1987; Hadley, 2001, p. 161) and expanded upon. This transfer can be seen in the production of these quite high and sophisticated language and writing skills. This activity allows the students to negotiate, practice and hone these skills in and through the target language.

Through using music, the representation of another society does not become a desiccated recitation of facts, figures and set ideas, but evolves into an interactive experience, all of which can lead to further sociological and global awareness. Because study, presentation and research is mostly conducted in English, and the content matter is familiar and appealing, linguistic capabilities are also used and developed.

6. LEVEL PLAYING FIELD AND EXPANSION

Another way in which student defences to cultural differences are dissolved, to a degree, is that they gain a modicum of insider status to the culture through their research and the medium (music). Apart from the appeal of music, particularly to the young as discussed above, another element is that the music is often not in English or Japanese, and this means that until research is undertaken, everyone, including the teacher has outsider status to a point, so all class members are experts *and* novices in terms of knowledge of content, until they research more and communicate their findings (Duff, 2005, p. 56). In theory, students start on a ‘level playing field’, which can motivate them to communicate in the target language, as all the information is new to everyone, therefore, classroom dynamics of students fitting allotted roles (teachers and students can routinely fall into this trap) can potentially be subverted (Duff, 2005). Having a strong technical knowledge of music, as many of the students do, can also help facilitate a sense of insider status. Therefore, the subject matter becomes of value, and wishing to communicate the worth of this, the universal language of it, can conversely lead to acceptance, awareness and value of difference through the shared experience of the enjoyment of song.

As a follow up, the Putumayo website links to various non-profit organizations and the students investigate global issues associated with them. Having established a connection through their music and research, hopefully they also feel a connection with these broader issues, rather than viewing them through the eyes of an outsider.

7. CONCLUSION (THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY)

Empathy, and particularly cultural empathy, has become a subject of study and instruction in many educational situations, whether under the banner of teaching “character and resilience”, or part of understanding how to better connect with a wider global community (Morris as cited in “Character can”, 2014 ¶23; Tomalin, 2008; Hacker, 2013). To feel empathy towards others we need to feel a connection with them (Grossman, 1996, p.160). We need to view others as *not* so very different from us, and need to oppose desensitization which can lead us to view others as ‘bugsplats’ or ‘unpeople’. Strengthening empathy helps build healthy societies (Hacker, 2013), and strengthening connection helps build empathy. A recent article stated that “[l]anguage is the key to unlocking culture and in a shrinking, swirling, multicultural world, multilingualism is a crucial tool,” (Shirrefs, 2014, introduction). Studying music in English, especially the world’s music in English, addresses and appeals to both a multicultural and multilingual world. Both Bennett (2011, p. 8) and many linguists argue that intercultural sensitivity and multilingualism can promote empathy (Dewaele & Wei, 2012).

An exercise such as bringing world music into the EFL classroom promotes connection in an attainable manner, and encourages students to develop a view of global interdependency. This, at best, can hopefully, act as a form of antidote to militarily and societally condoned disassociation and disconnection, and at the least, raise the students’ awareness that a diversity of cultures can mutually exist and contribute to one another. The fact that linguistic aptitude also improves, or at the least linguistic use and automaticity progresses, is the icing on the cake.

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