



The World Through Music: Using World Music in a Comparative Culture Course

by Susan Laura Sullivan (Aichi University, Japan)



Introduction

According to the *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity* (Bennett, 1986/2011), there are many defenses that students can display towards developing an awareness of both their own culture and other cultures. Activities designed to overcome these defenses are sorely needed in a world where ‘accidental’ drone victims are officially regarded as “bugsplats” (Robinson, 2011), 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, 2012).

“Experience of difference” (Bennett, 1992), both for Japanese students and other nationalities, can be encouraged through activities which incorporate pre-existing interests and knowledge. Music, particularly for university students, is one such interest. Music can connect students to other cultures in an accessible, meaningful and non-threatening manner, which can lead to a broader and more nuanced view of the world (Bennett, 1992, p. 3). The idea of tapping into and opening up student schemata, and transferring pre-existing information into new fields is not foreign to TESOL instructors (Widdowson, 1984, p. 223). This process can help improve language skills as well as raise cultural awareness.

Rationalization

On March 19, 2014, a Tokyo court ruled that a Ghanaian man refracted to death due to unlawful measures of restraint employed by Narita airport security guards (Johnson, 2014). One key word attached to Johnson’s article was ‘xenophobia’. Australia, my homeland, also has a history of xenophobia, elements of which are perpetuated today in its asylum seeker policies, and its attempts 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).

Discrimination can be normalized in policies and actions such as the now defunct *White Australia Policy* (Deen, 2014), and 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...”. 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.

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. Within Bennett’s model, there are various suggestions towards developing students’ comfort with understanding that their culture can coexist with others. Initially he argues it is important to “[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 they reflect on, and sometimes change, their experience, likes and dislikes (personal communication, 2013).

Music is something most university students and young adults connect to and love. In Japan, popular music tends to be Japanese, Korean and English-lyric pop (de la Torre, 1996-2014). The majority of foreign music popular among the below 25’s (excepting K-Pop) consists of songs in English from the inner circle countries of the U.S., the U.K. and to a lesser degree, Canada (de la Torre, 1996-2014; Kachru, 1985). 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 cultural “gatekeeping” may be a by-product or a cause of commercial promotion of this music (Pennycook, 1994, in Kachru, 2005, p. 160).

Project Work Using Putumayo World Music

The Putumayo record 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 countries.

Some music is recent; some goes as far back as the 1930s (Nieset, 2013). Over a 5 to 7 week period, my students in the Department of Comparative Culture are allocated 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). They use the *Putumayo World Music* site to choose a song, research an artist, and from there, learn more about the history of the performer, the style of music, the instruments used, and the countries from which they hail.

Students present their findings in pairs. Their work is later used as a scaffold to discuss musical preferences, to provide feedback and to develop macro skills. Even though music might focus on a limited area of culture within a region, it is still a new area for many students. 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 music, as it has a commonality of existence amongst most cultures. Therefore, both practical and cultural language skills can increase.

Through 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.

Putumayo is a gateway to music styles and sounds from different regions for many listeners (Nieset, 2013). The founder, Dan Storper, hopes to encourage people to explore more work by the artists featured. Fans have travelled afar due to the impact of the music on their lives. Students using the Putumayo site to complete this project have mentioned researching musicians, or aspects of music or regions, beyond assigned requirements, and mentioned wishing to visit areas of the world they hadn't previously considered.

Dissolving Cultural Defenses

The above indicates student defenses to cultural differences are dissolved to a degree, especially as students gain some degree of insider status to the culture through their research and the medium (music). Additionally, the Putumayo website links to various non-profit organizations and a follow-up assignment has students investigate global issues. Having established a connection through their music and research, hopefully they also feel a connection with these broader issues, rather than just viewing them dispassionately.

Conclusion (The Importance of Empathy)

Empathy, in particular 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 varied global community (Morris as cited in “Character Can”, 2014; 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 ‘bug-splats’ or ‘unpeople’. Strengthening empathy builds healthy societies (Hacker, 2013), and strengthening connection helps build empathy.

An exercise such as bringing world music into the EFL classroom promotes connection in an attainable manner, and encourages students to develop a sense of global interdependency. This, at best, can hopefully act as a form of antidote to militarily and societally condoned global disassociation and disconnection, and at the least, raise students’ awareness that a diversity of cultures can mutually exist and contribute to one another.

References

- Bennett, M. J. (1986, 2011). A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. *The Intercultural Development Research Institute*. Retrieved March 2, 2014 from: www.idrinstitute.org/allegati/IDRI_t_Pubblicazioni/47/FILE_Documento_Bennett_D_MIS_12pp_quotes_rev_2011.pdf
- Character can and should be taught in schools, says Hunt. (February 12, 2014). *BBC News London*. Retrieved February 15, 2014 from www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-26140607
- Chomsky, N. (2012, January 9). Recognizing the ‘unpeople’. *In These Times and the Institute for Public Affairs*. Retrieved April 8, 2014 from http://inthesetimes.com/article/12501/recognizing_the_unpeople
- de la Torre, N. The music business in Japan, indie music culture and promoting your music in Japan. *Japan Music Marketing, 1996-2013*. Retrieved November 14, 2013 from <http://japanmusicmarketing.com/article2.htm>
- Deen, H. (2014, April 8). Humour isn't a total response against bigotry. *newmatilda.com*. Retrieved April 8, 2014 from <https://newmatilda.com/2014/04/08/humour-isnt-total-defence-against-bigotry>
- Grossman, D. (1996). *On Killing: The psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society*. London, Ontario: Little, Brown & Company. Retrieved April 20, 2014 from https://archive.org/details/On_Killing

Hacker, T (2013, January 28). Building empathy builds society. *Seattle Times*. Retrieved April 21, 2014 from http://seattletimes.com/html/health/2020198902_healthhackerxml.html

Johnson, C. (March 28, 2014). Court rules Japan officials killed deportee at Narita. *Deutsche Well*. Retrieved April 2, 2014: www.dw.de/court-rules-japan-officials-killed-deportee-at-narita/a-17527619

Kachru, Y. (2005). Teaching and learning of world Englishes. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 155-173). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Nieset, L. (2013, June 20). Putumayo returns to its roots with acoustic America and American playground releases. *New Times Broward-Palm Beach*. Retrieved November 13, 2014 from http://blogs.browardpalmbeach.com/countygrind/2013/06/putumayo_acoustic_america_playground_20_years.php/

Robinson, J. (2011, November 29). ‘Bugsplat’: The ugly US drone war in Pakistan – Opinion. *Al Jazeera English*. Retrieved April 8 from www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/201111278839153400.html

Schoepp, K. (2001). Reasons for using song in the ESL/EFL classroom. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. VII, No. 2, February 2001 <<http://iteslj.org/>>

Taylor, B.P. (1976). Teaching composition to low-level ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly* 10(3), 309-319

Widdowson, H. (1984). Reading and Communication. In J.C. Alderson (Ed.), *Reading in a foreign language*, (pp.213-230). New York: Longman.

Susan Laura Sullivan

Aichi University, Japan

E-mail: <susan@vega.aichi-u.ac.jp>



Putumayo World Music

< www.putumayo.com >

Putumayo World Music was established in 1993 to introduce people to the music of the world’s cultures. *Putumayo Kids* introduces children to world cultures through music CDs, videos and coloring books. Free downloadable teaching guides, song lyrics and class activities can help teachers introduce world music into geography, social studies and arts curricula. Putumayo has worked to help communities in the countries where its music originates by contributing over \$1 million to NGOs around the world including Amnesty International, Mercy Corps, Seva and Population Services International (PSI).

Putumayo Music Categories

	Africa	Blues/Jazz	Europe	Holiday
	America	Brazil	Global	Latin
	Asia	Caribbean / Reggae	Groove	Middle East

Classroom Procedure

1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students form pairs and choose one type of music from the Putumayo website. Only one pair presents on a category, so they need to decide their 2nd, 3rd or 4th choices.
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students click on various albums listed for their genre. They then listen to short music excerpts from selected songs.
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students choose an artist from the songs listed and note where he or she is from. They research his/her life, country, music, instrument, style and something they find interesting.
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students make a <i>prezi</i> presentation and prepare a class quiz about the music they researched. They also post a video of their music on <i>edmodo</i> so other students can listen and comment. Throughout the semester, they post weekly journal notes on their music, artist and country.

Shin-Eiken Association

< www.shin-eiken.com >

新英語教育研究会

Shin-Eiken is a high school English teachers’ group that promotes global awareness, peace and humanistic education. Check its Japanese website and magazine or attend its summer conference.

“Shin Eigo Kyoiku” (New English Classroom) Magazine

Sanyusha Press <www.sanyusha-shuppan.com>

A variety of articles on global themes appear in each month’s issue.

Magazine Issue # 536 (April 2014)

- *Pen-pal Exchange with Korean JH Students* (Mineko Kashimura)
- *Kobe Earthquake: 1000 Winds, 1000 Cellos* (Masakazu Nozaki)
- *Thematic English at Primary School: Global Issues* (Fumi Ayabe)
- *Teaching about “Motala and Landmines”* (Shigeki Hayashi)
- *World Names: Sharing with Students in Mongolia* (Joji Sugiyama)
- *Pete Seeger and the Song “We Shall Overcome”* (Junko Machida)