

[論 文]

## Realia and Culture Content-Based EFL

Greg Goodmacher

Universities and high schools throughout Asia hire foreigners to teach the languages and the cultures of their home countries in content-based English courses. Many of those teachers complain that commercially produced language textbooks, especially those for culture content-based English language classes, are problematic. Common problems include inappropriate levels for the target group, insufficient focus on active language skills development, out-of-date information, and cultural topics that do not match the interests of the both students and teachers. Thus, teachers often end up creating their own teaching materials, but these materials may also have shortcomings due to the inexperience of the materials designer, a lack of other enthusiastic teachers to help with editing, and in particular a shortage of useful “realia” to use with or to be adapted for teaching materials.

Nunan (1999) defined realia as “objects and teaching ‘props’ from the world outside the classroom that are used for teaching and learning” (p.313). Many language teachers confuse “realia” with “authentic text.” In an interview in 2004, Nunan cleared up this confusion by explaining that realia is “a superordinate term, one that would subsume authentic text” (Siders, 2004 para.8). Authentic texts, sometimes called “authentic materials,” have been extensively written about in the literature of second language. There has been considerable discussion in the TEFL/TESL field regarding the advantages and disadvantages of authentic materials in the last two decades (Tomlinson, 2003).

However, the literature suffers from a serious lack of discussion regarding the connection between realia and culture and how best to use realia for teaching culture in content-based courses. In the culture content-based language classroom, realia can be utilized for a valuable teaching purpose that has not received enough attention in the ESL/EFL field. The realia can be considered to be a cultural object that is very useful for “cross-cultural analysis,” a way of studying similarities and differences among cultures. (Corsaro, 1992).

Culture includes “language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2004, culture section, para.1). Language is obviously an essential aspect of culture, but it is rarely taught or examined from a cultural perspective. Language is usually studied in isolation, yet teaching language points in the context of their

cultural environment is optimal.

This article will attempt to answer the following three questions that foreign teachers who are attempting to teach a home culture-content based EFL class might ask: How can native English speakers who are living in a foreign country find and choose appropriate realia?; Which aspects of the cultural artifact should teachers focus on?; How can teachers best exploit or use realia for developing linguistic and content knowledge and skills?

## Searching for Appropriate Realia

One solution for culture-content based EFL teachers who are able to return to their home countries during their vacation time or research time is to keep their eyes open for useful realia such as magazines, adult education pamphlets, menus, newspapers, advertisements, maps and voting brochures. Teachers must develop an awareness of what can be utilized in a classroom. This involves both becoming more creative as materials designers and also more sensitive to the target culture and to the culture of the students.

Teachers involved in materials development can benefit by developing two useful skills when working with authentic materials. One skill requires being able to spot and extract useful linguistic elements (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, vocabulary) for language teaching. Teachers must be aware of what is missing from the linguistic knowledge or linguistic skills of students and then find useful elements in the realia which can strengthen the weaknesses of students.

The second skill involves being able to notice and extract cultural information (e.g., beliefs, food, clothing styles, values, and customs). In regards to these cultural elements, the concepts of material and non-material culture can be a useful guide. According to Goodmacher and Kajiura, (2005) "Material cultural refers to things people make with their hands or by machines...non-material culture consists of products not made by hand-languages, religions and other beliefs, customs and traditions (p.8). In this way of thinking about culture and materials development for culture related classes, what might be considered as a simple sort of realia, for example, a personal advertisement, a comic strip, or a college brochure can, after a careful analysis, be used to teach both material aspects and non-material aspects of culture.

Most students can learn to recognize and superficially understand many material objects fairly easily. However, non-material products are usually much more difficult to identify and understand. Creating exercises that train students to be more sensitive to both aspects of another culture will greatly benefit the students with not only understanding another culture but also with understanding their own culture.

## Needs Analysis

Before searching for materials, teachers should do a needs analysis to discover what aspects of the target culture that students want to study. There are many ways for a teacher to discover the needs of students. One simple way is to give students a list of target-culture related topics and ask students to rank them according to preference. Another method is to simply ask students to write the specific topics that they want to study.

In addition to discovering the cultural interests of students, teachers must also attempt to understand their linguistic needs. Language tests used for grading purposes can also serve as sources of diagnostic information regarding language needs of students.

Furthermore, in order to better assist students, a teacher should also consider the linguistic needs of students for various language tests that students may take outside of school. For example, a number of my students regularly come to my office to request practice with the speaking section of an important examination called the Standardized Test for English Placement (STEP); a high test score on the STEP test can assist students with finding employment with companies that require English skills.

## American Culture, American Comics, and STEP Test Preparation

While reading a comic book with my nephew in America, it occurred to me that short American comic strips are very similar to pictures that Japanese students must speak about during the interview section of the STEP test. To pass this interview, students must describe the events that are happening in a comic strip-like sequence of three pictures. When they start their verbal explanation, students must read aloud a sentence that accompanies the pictures. After that, students continue their explanation without any aids. Moreover, students must be able to answer three questions about the pictures. To get a high score and pass the examination, an ability to use transitional adverbs is essential.

The same communicative process can be performed in an American content-based classroom, allowing students to develop and to practice the same skills that students must have to pass the STEP test. In addition, the pictures and questions can lead students to analyze American culture. Because my students are very interested in the lives of American high school and college students, I chose sections from a humorous comic book which covered the topic of summer activities of American students. During the process of linguistically decoding the language within the comic strip, and during the process of explaining what was happening, the students gained new knowledge about the customs and behaviors of American youth. The students who planned to take the STEP test were also better prepared for the testing situation.

## Example of Activities and Materials Based on One Realia

Food, shopping, and the cost of living were three aspects of American culture that many of my students expressed an interest in. Grocery store advertisements are useful for teaching these. I brought twenty of these advertisements back to Japan. The linguistic needs that I wanted to focus on were names of common food items, terms for units of weight used in America which are not used in Japan (i.e. pounds and quarts), American money terminology, and expressing likes and dislikes. Additional cultural points that students studied were differences and similarities in packaging, eating habits, and shopping habits. To create the condition for students to actively use the linguistic items in conversation practice and to make them think about prices, additional teaching materials needed to be created, as well as a scenario.

The scenario is a role play in which pairs of students pretend that they are American housemates who buy groceries together and plan meals together. Each student has only thirty-five dollars to contribute for a week's worth of food. Students read the grocery advertisements and discuss which items to buy. They must fill in a chart with the names and prices and quantities of the food item. Students cannot spend more than the allotted amount of money and they must have enough food for three meals each day. As homework, students took the advertisements into Japanese grocery stores and compared prices, keeping in mind and adjusting for how the same items are packaged differently. Students were instructed to choose and compare the prices of

Table of Realia Adapted for Language and Culture Instruction

Type of Realia	Studied Linguistic Items	Practiced Language Function or Language Skill	Studied Aspect of America
U.S. Map Showing World Heritage Sites	Directions that are names. Compass directions.	Giving Directions, English Map Reading Skills, Pronunciation, Explaining Locations	World Heritage Sites, Regions of the U.S.A
A Book Reviewing American Colleges	Many new vocabulary items (i.e. tuition, debt, grant, grade point average).	Scanning reading skills, Describing the good points and bad points of colleges, Comparing and contrasting.	American College Life, College Entrance Requirements.
Adult Education Catalog	New vocabulary items related to various classes.	Skimming and scanning reading skills. Convincing other students to take a class.	Concept of Continuing Education, Adult Students, Personal Development Advertising
A Video Introducing Freestyle Frisbee	Vocabulary for body parts. Verbs. Imperative Sentences.	Listening for specific words. Following spoken directions.	New American Sport

five food items that are sold in both America and Japan. In the following class, students reported their findings to other students and discussed the cost of living in America and Japan. Students participated very enthusiastically in this experiential learning experience.

## Conclusion

Studying language points in a situation that is as close as possible to the original cultural milieu (the realia) has much more appeal for students than simply being assigned to read a text or listen to a lecture about another culture. The approach that Tomalin and Stemplesky take to the adaptation of realia and the creation of materials is one that teachers should heed since their approach is very pedagogical effective. They explain that teaching "culture with a task-oriented and co-operative learning approach adds a new dimension of achievement and understanding for the students" (1994,p.9). The realia must be adapted or used in a manner that allows students to both fulfill a purpose with the language and to understand how the language connects to aspects of the target culture.

The value of authentic materials for English teaching in the average English language class has been extensively discussed, but there is still room for more analysis and creativity regarding the use of realia in culture-content based English teaching. Teachers need to increase their ability to find useful realia, to create teaching objectives from the realia, and to design materials to help students to better understand a foreign culture and to better use the target language.

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