

Implementing Kubota's "Four Ds" Approach to Culture in EFL Classrooms

Daniel Andrzejewski

Konan University

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Abstract

This article reviews Ryuko Kubota's "4Ds" recommendations for teaching culture found in "Critical Teaching of Japanese Culture" (2003). Kubota presents a critical approach for language and culture teachers where culture should be taught in terms of a "Descriptive understanding of culture", "Diversity within culture", the "Dynamic nature of culture", and the "Discursive construction of culture" (Kubota, 2003). While Kubota provides examples of this approach to teaching Japanese culture to students, I sought to apply the same method to EFL in a Japanese university context. This essay details how the 4Ds were incorporated into courses focused on language skills (speaking, listening and reading). The article concludes with recommendations and encouragements for EFL teachers seeking to seamlessly add cultural content to skills courses with a critical outlook into skill development activities.

EFL クラスにおける文化理解を深める久保田氏の4Dアプローチの実践についての概要本論は、久保田竜子氏の論文「日本文化を批判的に教える」(Critical Teaching of Japanese Culture, 2003)で推奨された、文化を教えるにあたっての「4Dアプローチ」のレビューである。久保田は言語と文化の教師に対して、「文化の記述的理解」、「文化内の多様性」、「流動的な文化の性質」、「文化の言説的構築」(Kubota, 2003)の観点から文化を教えるべきである、という批判的アプローチを提唱している。久保田はこのアプローチを用いて日本文化を学生に教えるという実例を提供しているが、私自身も日本の大学でEFLを学ぶ学生に同様のメソッドを実践してみた。本論では、言語技能(スピーキング、リスニング、リーディング)に重点を置いた授業課程にこの4Dアプローチをどのように取り入れたのかを詳しく説明する。最後に、言語技能クラスに批判的見解による文化教育を自然な形で取り入れようと考えているEFL教育者の方々に提言と奨励を提示する。

EFL teachers tasked with improving student language skills may have trouble juggling cultural instruction at the same time. "One often reads in teachers' guidelines that language teaching consists of teaching four skills 'plus culture'" (Kramersch, 1993, p. 8). This causes unnecessary dichotomies of language versus culture and skill versus content, with instructors wondering how to add cultural content while covering the four skills (Kramersch, 1993). In addition to this

tension, teaching culture begs further questions: “How can educators represent cultural content appropriately without relying on stereotypes?” and “What content or method will be most helpful for student understanding of culture?” Ryuko Kubota addresses the problematic nature of cultural instruction in her publication, *Critical Teaching of Japanese Culture* (2003). While she focuses on instruction of the Japanese language, the same approach can be applied to EFL instruction in Japan.

Kubota examines the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (US) with a postmodern understanding of culture where “...culture is viewed as diverse, dynamic, and fluid, constructed and transformed by political and ideological forces.” (Kubota, 2003, p. 70). She goes on to critique the standards for viewing culture as a set of discernable and unchanging truths of a homogenous group. This ignores the fact that cultures are diverse, changing, and what we understand as a “truth” about culture can be a discourse crafted with ideological purposes (Kubota, 2003). From this perspective, how can a language teacher impart cultural understanding when culture is such a complicated issue? Kubota offers an approach called “The Four Ds” (Kubota, 2003, p. 75). Teachers should remember a “Descriptive understanding of culture”, “Diversity within culture”, the “Dynamic nature of culture”, and the “Discursive construction of culture” (Kubota, 2003).

Framework and Research Questions

The process for my research fits within the framework of Reflective Practice as a part of Experiential Learning Theory (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993), following the Experiential Learning Cycle of “experience, observation and reflection, abstract reconceptualization, and experimentation” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 3). My previous experience introducing culture in EFL courses elicited these questions: “How can I teach culture more effectively given the time constraints of a skills-based course?” and “What content should I be teaching?” After this reflection, Kubota’s approach provided conceptual parameters to work within the developing of content. This process produced one final question: “Can I easily and practically create cultural content following ‘The Four Ds’ in my EFL classes?” Completing one turn in the learning cycle, this paper shares my experiences, observations and reflections in answering this question.

Methods and Participants

While I have several content-based courses, I wanted to apply Kubota’s guidelines specifically in skill-based courses as I introduced cultural content to students at a private university in western Japan. The focus of my application was on three courses: a first-year listening and speaking class (18 students), a second-year intermediate speaking class (10 students), and an elective advanced reading class for third and fourth year students (8 students), covering one 15-week semester. The first and second year classes are part of an English intensive course. Many of these students are interested in study abroad or have goals to use English in their future workplaces. The elective reading class included students with a wide variety of levels and with less plans to use English in the future than the intensive students.

Results and Discussion

Kubota contends that teaching culture can often become prescriptive and encourage essentialism, the “pursuit of a pure,

unique, and all-encompassing identity for a certain group” (Kubota, 2003, p. 72). Rather than trying to represent an entire culture, a descriptive approach can be used to show and understand certain cross-sections of culture as examples. In my second-year course, a unit of the text discusses planning parties. Keeping with the theme, I chose a cloze listening activity of a music video that depicts band members attending a party (HotChelleRaeVEVO, 2012). The setting is suburban America and the crowd is predominantly white. The students’ primary task was to fill in the missing lyrics on a worksheet. After we went over the answers, I went through the video once more, asking simple questions: “What is he doing?” “What do you think they are drinking?” This exercise prompted new cultural information for the students. The video depicts a college-age style party, complete with people playing beer pong and drinking out of red plastic cups. Students were able to see one example of a party their peers might attend. The song describes tagging an ex-girlfriend in photos and we discussed what social network (Facebook) is being referenced here. Students are then able to process and understand differences and similarities to their own cultural experiences of socializing. As we completed the activity, I emphasized that this was one example of a party they might encounter while studying abroad. It is a description of one cross-section of culture intended for native speakers, yet video sources such as music videos can be helpful for ESL cultural instruction (Stempleski, 1987; Dema & Moeller, 2012) while lyrics and music texts can provide cultural insight (Failoni, 1993).

As an instructor, nearly every beginner and intermediate level text includes a section on making a self-introduction. I sought to go beyond students creating and practicing their own self-introductions and used the opportunity to consider issues of diversity and identity, as this discussion “can facilitate a non-essentialist understanding of language and culture” (Kubota, 2013, p. 76). The second-year students completed a listening comprehension and reaction worksheet to supplement a video blog of a Zainichi Korean woman introducing herself (Lavidadeizumi, 2013). This video includes the creator’s feelings on identity and growing up as a minority in Japan. Students were asked to write questions they would ask the creator and a class discussion was held. This exercise challenged students to consider exploring the diversity of experiences that exist in their own culture and how they could add more depth to their own self-introductions.

In the first year course, students were given a variety of music videos as cloze activities, including some that highlighted different Englishes and slang not learned in textbooks. One song, “Me Love” by Sean Kingston (SeankingstonVEVO, 2009) served as an example that Jamaican English demonstrated different grammatical usages than students were used to learning. Starting with the title, students understand that “me” is used in place of “my” and find other examples of differences in the lyrics. Students were able to consider the second “D” of diversity through considering diverse identities and linguistic backgrounds.

In the first and second year courses, students were exposed to the third “D”, the dynamic nature of culture and change, through these music videos. “Honestly” presents the aforementioned situation of tagging photos for social media use as well as the phrase “My phone’s blowing up tonight” (HotChelleRaeVEVO, 2012). Students were introduced to the changes in technology that lead to cultural and linguistic change. Students examined new language powered by technology with verbs such as “friend”, “unfriend”, “tweet” and “text.” First year students listened to Kelly Clarkson’s “My Life Would Suck Without You” (KellyclarksonVEVO, 2009) as an example of slang and used online

dictionaries to research slang and secondary meanings. Interacting with authentic materials and encouraging research of new words and phrases is part of an inquiry-based approach to learning culture, which “fosters higher-order thinking to assist students in uncovering and exploring the hidden meanings and significances embedded in L2 culture” (Dema & Moeller, 2012, p. 81).

The final “D” I implemented is a discursive approach to learning culture. This seeks to make students aware of the narratives surrounding culture used for political purposes or to benefit certain ideologies. This was addressed in two different courses, starting with my Advanced Reading class on Japanese culture. The text for this course is “The Japanese Mind” (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). A collection of essays from Japanese university students, *The Japanese Mind* seeks to explain different aspects of Japanese culture, including *Amae, Uchi/Soto, and Shudan Ishiki*. While a valuable resource for its organization of topics, *The Japanese Mind* frequently cites authors such as Doi, Nakane and Sakaiya, who conceptualize “Japaneseness” through the lens of “nihonjinron” (Sugimoto, 1999). *Nihonjinron* equates Japanese nationality, ethnicity and culture as traits all Japanese possess (Sugimoto, 1999) with an emphasis on contrasting these traits with western cultures. Through repeating the two-pronged definition of homogeneity and uniqueness, I asked students to identify passages and ideas where this thinking might be present. When considering how a culture of vagueness (*aimai*) developed, the book states this is due to the difficulty of rice cultivation on an island like Japan creating a need for harmony, according to the theory of geographic determinism (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). When students often agreed with this assessment, they were asked if there were any other mountainous islands that cultivated rice. When able to consider other countries with similar agricultural challenges that developed different cultures, they conceded that Japan was not unique nor its culture pre-determined by geography. When different cultural features were discussed, students were directed back to the question of whether these traits apply to everyone living in Japan and if they are in fact unique to Japan.

In the second-year speaking class, students examined the idea of discourse through an activity of “Meeting on the Congo” (Merryfield & Timbo, 1983). For a unit focused on past-tense usage and storytelling, I gave students one of two different historical accounts of the meeting and conflict of the first white men to be seen in the Congo. Students were then paired and one given the diary of a Welsh-American explorer and the other a record of the incident according to King Mojimba, a resident of the area. They then had to piece together the events and why they happened. Students were able to read narratives of differing perspectives and understand how point of view colors our version of history and “truth”.

Conclusion

The integration of Kubota’s “Four Ds” approach into skills courses was possible with some thought and preparation. In the aforementioned examples, this often did not require significant changes in curriculum and materials. Instead, it required an intentionality and critical mindset within planned activities. Listening comprehension materials were already being used, but sometimes, it was simply needed to attend to the diversity or dynamic cultural components already present in them. These resources were also used to offer descriptions of culture, rather than relying on a textbook or the teacher’s own prescriptive view. A text on Japanese culture revealed more when considered in light of larger

discursive elements. Heeding Kubota's recommendations in the "Four Ds" can be an effective way to assimilate culture and language instruction, while challenging students and instructors alike, to take a more critical understanding of our world. This framework offers an invitation for further experimentation and reflection to improve cultural instruction in the EFL field.

Bio Data

Daniel Andrzejewski studied Japanese language in college but majored in Social Studies Education (M. Ed) at The Ohio State University. After graduating, he has taught kindergarten through high school as well as in cram school and English conversation school settings in Fukushima, Tokyo and Osaka. He currently works at Konan University. <omoikiridaniel@gmail.com>

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