

Media and Culture at iCoToBa: Designing Critical Thinking into an EFL Course

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Course Concept and Goals

The concept for the course I will describe here arose from two requirements, one institutional and one personal. The institutional requirement came as part of the curriculum for the Office of Global Human Resource Development, to which I belong. Our office was formed at Aichi Prefectural University in 2013 through a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Our mission is to nurture a “global” mindset in our students through special language courses and the promotion of study-abroad programs. Courses focus on practical English usage and cultural awareness. They are also designed to link with an integrated study-abroad program.

Based on these requirements, each teacher was asked to create a course for the fall semester of 2013 geared towards third and fourth-year students returning from study-abroad programs in English-speaking countries. These students could be presumed to have both an advanced level of English and some experience in courses taught in English. I saw two conceptual options here: either to continue their English education within the paradigm of the university or to create a business-oriented course to prepare them for a global working environment. While acknowledging the benefits of the latter, I opted for the former, designing the course in the form of a senior seminar like those at American universities.

This choice stems from the personal requirements I place on my teaching. It goes without saying that as a language teacher I want my students to improve their English proficiency. However, my background in the humanities pushes me to also develop their critical thinking skills. However tired the ideal may seem in these jaded decades, the original charge of the university is to produce graduates who possess a working knowledge of the world, an understanding of the forces that move it, and the critical repertoire to make informed judgments within it. Furthermore, it is an ideal that demands reviving. In an interconnected world where subjects receive a flood of competing information every minute of their waking lives, the need to think is more important than ever. I strongly believe that like every other academic pursuit university foreign language instructions should consider this a duty as well.

At the Office of Global Human Resource Development we have a perfect opportunity to put this into practice. Our courses (referred to casually as iCoToBa courses) are taught *in addition to* credited language classes, with students attending voluntarily. This voluntary basis encourages

us to design exciting courses that diverge radically from traditional “four skills” instruction. These departures are not without impetus either. The very creation of the Office of Global Human Resource Development speaks to the fact that the Japanese Ministry of Culture and Education is aware of the need for a new kind of English language education that focuses on global participation and individual action. Critical thinking forms an essential part of the skill set we are trying to develop here.

To achieve a course that develops critical thinking skills while allowing students to enrich their English skills as language learners, I created the course *Media and Culture* (メディアと文化 in Japanese.) The course may be seen as a kind of immersion. It adheres as closely as possible to the experience of a “native” college English course. Just like in these courses, critical thinking and cultural awareness are treated as *primary* goals. The language acquisition goals – vocabulary building, fluency practice, and reading – are treated as *secondary* goals and are not brought into direct focus within a given lesson. I am defining critical thinking along the lines of Jodi Cohen in the textbook *Communication Criticism* as being able to understand and explain “how and why symbols and people come together in ways that effectively, truthfully, or ethically shape meaning,” as well as being able to make “conscious choices about our identities, ideas, and behaviors” (Cohen 16). Critical thinking here does not mean saying “this is good/bad.” It is an evaluative process of discovering how certain things are made to seem good or bad in our lives as members of a mediated society.

I chose the content of the course for several reasons. First, it is my field of study, and thus a topic that I can teach with full efficacy. Second, the texts concerned – contemporary films, internet culture, products and advertisements, subcultures, etc. – connect to students’ everyday experience. Third, the content deals directly with communication, language, and meaning. This will encourage the students to think more creatively and flexibly about language in general and their use of English specifically.

Characteristics and Constraints

As mentioned above, the expected students for this course would have returned from studying abroad in an English-speaking country. Ideally, we could expect them to function in a native environment. One fear was that the reality might find them less proficient than expected, a fear which impeded pre-planning. However, I designed the course believing that the students would meet these expectations.

ICoToba courses are non-credited and completely voluntary. Although courses have a pass/fail system, students receive no material disadvantage for not attending class, or even for a “fail” grade. It would thus be difficult to expect them to devote much out-of-class time toward study, media viewing, homework, etc. To encourage attendance it also seemed advisable to add an “infotainment” character to the lessons themselves. These constraints would detract from the authenticity of a full immersion experience, where students would be expected to read substantial texts and write responses outside of class on their own time in order to prepare for a

serious discussion in class. The course would have to balance this ideal with the reality of student motivation.

Course Content

Syllabus and Readings

This is a thirteen-week course with one 90-minute lesson per week.

As I mentioned above, the course strives to imitate as closely as possible the experience of a senior seminar at an American university. In this spirit I chose texts aimed at native English speakers to form the core readings for this group. The binding themes for all these readings were semiotic conceptions of culture that see cultural products as pregnant with meaningful signs. Through the readings and lesson content I hope to instill in students the ability to “read” the hidden messages of culture and to explain their reading effectively in English. In this sense, the students will develop critical thinking skills. Again, this is exactly the goal of a native class on the same subject.

I relied heavily on selections from *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* by Sturken and Cartwright. This book uses concrete examples to clearly illustrate difficult semiotic concepts, and thus is ideal for this course. Other texts included news articles, internet content, and a few famous works of cultural criticism: selections from Marshall McLuhan, Roland Barthes, and Dick Hebdige. A class of native speakers would be required to read full essays or chapters of these readings. However, as non-natives will assuredly encounter difficulties with these texts, I opted to assign selected passages/paragraphs of the text that constituted the main argument. These passages amount to a manageable 3-5 pages of text per week.

In addition, I created a set of “reading guides” to accompany the readings. Each guide features:

- 1) A set of comprehension questions which if answered accurately will ensure a general understanding of the text’s main points.
- 2) Numbered annotations in Japanese that translate difficult or multivalent words, clarify complex concepts, and introduce historical figures and events that Japanese students may not be familiar with.
- 3) A set of “thinking questions” designed to aid cognitive development. These can serve both as prompts for written responses and as introductory discussion topics in class.

These reading guides turn each *text* into a *textbook* for advanced English language learners. By directing the reader to key points/issues and by eliminating any cultural stumbling blocks, I am hoping to give him or her access to this assumedly inaccessible material.

Lesson Content

Lessons are 90 minutes. Each lesson consists of five basic sections. The order and time weighting of these sections change based on individual lesson content.

- 1) Introduction: In this section the students are presented with the lesson's main issue in the form of a visual text combined with a simple question. Students answer as a class, and a short discussion follows.
- 2) Comprehension: This section (casually titled "Did you Get It?") acts as the foreign language instruction of the class. After checking comprehension using the questions assigned in the reading guide, we clarify the actual language of the article – vocabulary, grammar, stylistic choice, etc.
- 3) Response and Discussion: Here the students form small groups and present their written responses to the thinking questions in the reading guide. Students are encouraged not to simply read their responses but to paraphrase and add new commentary in order to build an informed discussion.
- 4) People and Concepts: This is a lecture section. Its main goals are to reinforce the main ideas in the reading and to present difficult cultural issues in an accessible way. Lectures fully utilize PowerPoint and other multimedia tools to achieve these goals. I will discuss these in more detail in the following section.
- 5) Close Reading: Student are presented with a media text (films, ads, or photographs) to analyze and discuss in pairs or small groups. They are encouraged to use vocabulary and concepts from the lesson.

In order to test whether students have acquired the critical thinking skills I have described above I rely on the traditional final essay and written responses. For the latter, students reply to one of the prompts in the weekly reading guides (described above) and demonstrate that they have thought about the reading and the cultural issues it addresses. The final essay will be a short analysis of a text (in the semiotic sense) of their choice in the standard 5-paragraph format with an argument, 3 supports, and a conclusion. In addition to these measures, for certain units students bring in texts of their own – advertisements, photos of cultural practices, etc. They will discuss these during the "Close Reading" section of the lesson described above. This will serve as a kind of practice textual analysis preparing them for their final essay.

Addressing EFL Concerns

The lesson structure I have described above is noticeably more complex than a native seminar or graduate class. These usually consist of only two parts: a teacher lecture section at the beginning followed by student discussion. However, I felt that breaks between sections and alternations between language reception and production would help preserve students' concentration. The inclusion of the "Did You Get It?" section also seemed a necessary component for achieving the secondary goals of vocabulary building and reading

comprehension. Also, by removing “L2 anxieties” with this section, I can hopefully draw the students’ focus toward the primary goals of critical thinking and cultural awareness.

As described above, I created the Reading Guides with the aim of rendering a native *text* into a language learner’s *textbook*. In the same spirit, the “People and Concepts” lecture aims to close the gap between native and non-native instruction while preserving the critical rigor of the original material. It accomplishes this goal through heavy visualism combined with text-concepts and phrases in colloquial English. Below I present some slides from a module that seeks to clarify the “Toys” essay from Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*.



As you can see, this “lecture” is also meant to be interactive. The main issue of the text is simplified into a why question, which initiates a short class discussion. The subsequent slides introduce a difficult term using images and simple sentences. Through tactics such as these, academic topics are brought into the realm of everyday speech and made accessible to the language skills of learners. During pair/group discussion sections, students may continue in this vein. However, if language ability and topic interest permit, I can introduce more “academic” vocabulary into student discussions.

Preliminary Results

I have described above the course as originally planned. The course is still in progress at the time of this writing, so I cannot provide any final commentary on its results. However, there are a few preliminary observations worth mentioning, as they necessitated changing the content of the course.

Happily, the participating students proved to be ideal for the course: near-fluent (CEFR C1 / TOEIC 800+,) positive, and eager to learn about the topic. In addition, most of them knew each other. I had set a cap of 12 students maximum; 9 students enrolled. These factors made for a very comfortable class atmosphere.

However, the assignments did not exactly match these students’ expectations and goals. These students are very eager to engage with the topics and think critically in English, but within the realm of speaking. The reasons for this are quite understandable; having just returned from their experience abroad they want to maintain the communication skills they have acquired and, I suspect, to preserve the exhilaration of living and speaking in a foreign country. While they are willing to do the readings outside of class and to bring texts for in-class analysis, the

written responses apparently seem an unnecessary chore for an optional class. Instead of writing 200 words on one of the four thinking questions as required by the syllabus, literally every student answered all four questions by jotting down some notes as preparation. I see this as demonstrating not a lack of motivation but a clear indication of where this group of students wants to direct the course. Due to the nature of iCoToBa courses and their place in the Global Human Resource Development program, adhering to the original writing-centered plan and possibly driving away students seemed inadvisable. Though it does sacrifice a certain degree of the immersion experience, I opted to remove the written response requirement and focus more on in-class spoken participation.

So far the students have responded very well to the concepts of critical thinking. One very positive discussion occurred during the “Close Reading” section for a unit called “Media and Reality.” The students watched a clip from *The Matrix* and were asked to assess the film’s message about media in groups. One group assessed the film’s position as “we are slaves to our media” and launched into a discussion, with two students agreeing with the film’s position and two disagreeing. This discussion occurred without direct facilitation on my part. In another encouraging moment, one of the students used Barthes’ term *myth* in a different class to describe Japanese stereotypes of foreigners. Conversations like these indicate that the students are digesting the terms and concepts of the course.

One final reservation is that having removed the written responses I will have to completely rely on the final essay to assess the acquisition of the skill set. This does not amount to an issue in itself. However, I worry that under my current course plan students will have trouble transferring their critical analyses into writing. Though conversations like the one described above are increasing, students still do not quite know how to gather separate observations into a “this text means...” statement. Also, I do not think I can expect every student to be familiar with the 5-paragraph essay. Consequently, I believe I will have to devote one lesson to practicing the format using textual examples in order to solidify in the students’ minds exactly what I am looking for.

With these adjustments, I believe the course will be better able to balance the students’ real needs and desires with the original goal of writing critical thinking into English-language lessons at iCoToBa.

References

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