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# Learning Cultures Actively: Festivals and Holidays

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*Actively learning about festivals and holidays is a great way to approach culture. Learners acquire knowledge as well as experiencing a target cultural event. This poster session presented a summary of issues in teaching culture and a simple lesson plan for, photographs of learners participating in, and examples of learners' stories based on a "Halloween" lesson. During this lesson, learners: generate vocabulary lists; respond to quiz questions about the history and customs of Halloween; negotiate the creation of a Halloween costume; report on the steps involved in making the costume, justifying the chosen form; and follow "genre" guidelines in writing a story about their "costume character", finishing the stories*

*at home to share in the following lesson. Copies of this lesson plan and ideas for teaching other festivals and holidays are available on-line at: <<http://bradford-watts.freesevers.com/photo3.html>>.*

お祭りや祝日を体験的に学ぶということは、文化を知る上で非常に有効な方法です。生徒は対象となった文化イベントを経験するだけでなく、それに関する知識をも習得します。

このポスター・セッションが提示しているものは、文化について教える際の問題点、それに「ハロウィーン」レッスンのための簡単な授業プラン、参加した生徒の写真、そして生徒自身がこのレッスンを通して書いたストーリーです。生徒は単語リストを作成し、ハロウィーンの歴史や慣習についてのクイズに答え、ハロウィーンの衣装づくりを話し合い、なぜそれを選んだかという理由とともにその衣装の製作プロセスをレポートし、そしてその衣装キャラクターについてのストーリーを「ジャンル」ガイドラインに従って書き、残りを各自が宿題として自宅で完成させて次回のレッスンで読み合います。

ハロウィーン以外のお祭りや祝日を用いた同様のレッスンプランやアイデアも<<http://bradford-watts.freesevers.com/photo3.html>>にて見ることができます。

## Introduction

Peck (1984) states that "Helen Wilkes believes that the totality of language learning is comprised of three integrated components: linguistic, cultural, and attitudinal", arguing that "[c]elebrating foreign festivals is a favourite activity of many students... This kind of activity enables students to actively participate in the cultural heritage of the people they are studying." Additionally, by introducing cultural-based content into the EFL classroom, teachers can encourage purposeful

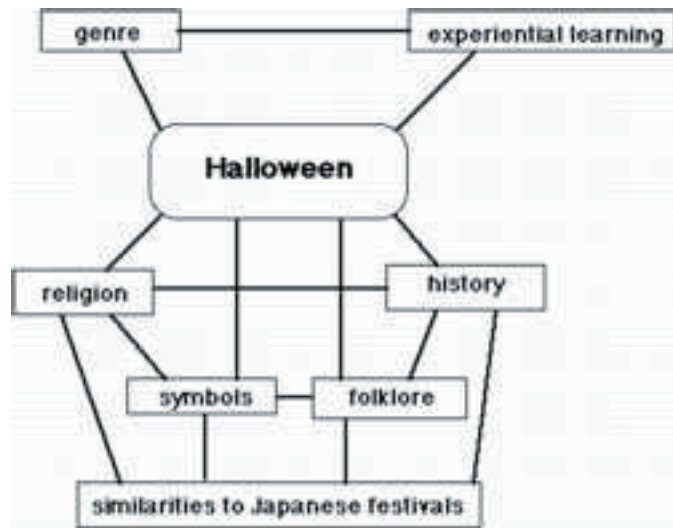
linguistic interaction between students, resulting in complex interplays of discourse types and the ability to focus on particular genres while catering for a variety of learner styles and encouraging the use of a range of learning strategies.

According to Paige, et al. (1999),

“To become effective culture learners, students must develop a variety of learning strategies ranging from reflective observation to active experimentation or what Kolb refers to as ‘experiential learning’ style. Most importantly it is knowing how to learn from the context while immersed in it, or what Hughes (1986) refers to as ‘learning how to learn.’”

Actively learning about festivals and holidays is a great way to approach the presentation of culture-based content. Using an active experiential approach, learners simultaneously acquire language while encountering aspects of the target cultural event. This kind of lesson is motivating since learners internalise the experience of creating cultural artifacts with a group or individually. The experience promotes meaning-making both linguistically and culturally.

The need to teach culture with language in L2 classrooms is commonly accepted in EFL teaching. The challenge for the classroom teacher is just how to do this in a motivating way, especially at the university or college level where contact with learners is limited throughout the school year. For lower level learners with limited exposure to the target culture, the focus of cultural instruction needs to be interesting to the learner, with the opportunity for the learner to relate the experience to their own life and culture. The following mind map indicates what can be learned from a class about Halloween:



Students learning about the holiday of Halloween can discover interrelationships between the history, religion, symbols and folklore of this holiday before drawing their own conclusions concerning the similarities of Halloween to Japanese festivals. During this class, learners have expressed that Halloween is similar to: *Setsubun*, since demons come out which are then chased away for another year; *Hina Matsuri*, since children eat a lot of sweets; and *Obon*, since the spirits of the dead return for a short time.

This process of encouraging students to notice similarities to their own culture is necessary for “bootstrapping” new experiences and understandings of the target culture to the cognitive symbolic representations students have already developed in conceptualising their own.

According to Singhal (1998),

“Kramersch (1993)...states that in order for learners to understand a foreign culture, it has to be placed in relation to one’s own culture. Interactions they have with native speakers, or texts for that matter, will require them to construct their own meanings. Rather than having educators simply transfer information about people and their culture, non-native speakers should have opportunities to make their own meanings and reflect on both the target culture and their own. She refers to this as establishing a ‘sphere of interculturality.’”

Thus, actively learning about a festival or holiday allows students to begin to establish a “sphere of interculturality” associated with festivals and holidays in general as well as those cultural aspects interrelated with them, while necessitating the creation of verbal and written texts appropriate to tasks.

Various discourses emerge during experiential lessons which are extremely difficult to initiate during a “standard” lesson. In the Halloween lesson described below, learners generate ideas for a costume which can be made from the available materials and discuss the process of how to make the costume, then organise who will undertake each task in the making of the costume, trouble-shooting as the need arises. Phatic communication is generated during the “informal” costume-making stage.

The group’s costume character is introduced to the class, and the process and the reasons for choosing that character are reported. The language produced during the reporting stage is guided and follows rules of genre (e.g. introducing a character, reporting steps in making something). However, much of the language during this class is produced spontaneously in recognition of the need to communicate in the completion of the creative task.

## The Halloween Unit

*Title of Unit:* Halloween

*Field of Experience:* Festivals and holidays

*Topics to be developed:* History and customs of Halloween; short story writing

*Level:* University and college, but could be adapted for other levels

*Time:* 90 minutes in the Halloween class, and time in the following class for students to share their stories.

### Intended Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will learn about the history of Halloween as an ancient festival incorporated into Christianity and exported to North America prior to dying out in Europe.
2. Students will reflect upon the similarities and differences to popular festivals in their home cultures.
3. Students will contribute to a list of vocabulary list of words associated with the holiday of Halloween.
4. Students will answer quiz questions about the history and customs of Halloween.
5. Students will negotiate in groups to construct a costume together. During this time they will be using linguistic structures appropriate to making suggestions, negating suggestions, offering alternative suggestions and directing an activity.
6. Students will introduce their character to the class, explain the reason(s) that they decided on that character and report about the process of making the costume.
7. Students will follow genre norms in writing short stories about the character they have created.

*Intelligences utilised during this class:* body/kinesthetic and visual/spatial (making the costume); verbal/linguistic (listening, answering, speaking, writing); interpersonal (group costume-making and report); intrapersonal (individual story writing). If the group has created an animal costume, students may also employ a naturalistic intelligence in their story writing by writing the story from the viewpoint of the animal.

*Resources:* Blackboard and chalk or white board and white board markers; Students need pencil and/or pen and paper; one “Reflections” sheet per student (Bradford-Watts, 2002). A set of the following for each group of students: 1 plastic garbage bag; 1 pair of scissors; 1 roll of packing tape; 1 length of toilet paper; a couple of pages of newspaper; 1 marker which will write on plastic.

## Method:

1. Write a flowery “H” on the board. It should not look too much like the letter “H”.
2. Ask students what this may be. When someone guesses it is the letter “H”, ask why you’ve written “H” for “Halloween.” (Because it is today/tomorrow/this week)
3. Elicit vocabulary students associate with this festival.
4. Give students a quick quiz about the history and customs of Halloween. When a group gets a “correct” answer, they get one point. In any question requiring association with Japan, students get a point for their answer supported by a reason.
5. When you’ve finished the quiz, hand out the materials for costume making.

6. Tell the students that they have 20 minutes only to “dress” a member of their group in a Halloween costume that they will make with the materials. They must speak English only during this period (I make this a speaking test. See Discussion below for further details).
7. At the end of the 20 minutes, give the groups 10 minutes to write a an introduction for their character, the reason(s) for selecting that character, and a report on the steps they took to make the costume. Have each group come to the front with their “model”. Ask them to give their report. (If you have a digital camera, it is great to take pictures of the students as they show off their costumes. Print up one copy for each person in the group so they have a photograph to remember it by. These can be kept in their clear files).
8. At the end of the “parade”, tell the groups that they have done a great job! You can get each group to call “trick or treat” and distribute candy, if you’d like.
9. Finally ask the students to write a story about their character for homework.
10. Students write their reflection sheets while teacher takes attendance and records grades for speaking test and presentation.

*Assessment strategies:* speaking test; group presentation; individual short stories

*Variations:* Younger students would enjoy this activity without the speaking test component. Higher-level students could discuss issues of stereotyping in costumes, such as the number of people dressing as terrorists or Bin Laden for Halloween 2002.

## Discussion

The Halloween lesson begins with a guessing exercise to arouse interest in the topic. The process of guessing in this way also starts the class off in a light-hearted way, allowing students to make “mistakes” and encouraging risk-taking. Once the shape drawn on the board has been guessed and the significance of it established, the teacher continues by eliciting vocabulary that students associate with Halloween. This list may be augmented by the teacher to include some of the target vocabulary that the teacher feels is necessary for the lesson, e.g. if candy is to be distributed later in the class, the teacher may wish to introduce “trick or treat” at this stage with a short explanation.

Following the vocabulary brainstorming, the teacher can continue with a quiz to allow the students to continue risk-taking in their guessing answers to the questions. Sample questions in the quiz may include:

- When is Halloween?
- Where was Halloween originally celebrated?
- Who originally celebrated Halloween?
- Where is Halloween celebrated today?
- Which Japanese festival or holiday is Halloween most similar to? Why?

As the teacher elicits answers, she may provide more information or explanation about the holiday.

Following this introduction, which has features common to the language classroom, the craft materials are distributed to each group. Students listen to the instructions (to use the materials to dress a group member in a Halloween costume to be constructed from the materials which they have been given). At this point, students become excited about making the costumes.

Students’ first reaction when faced with an interesting activity is to start communicating in L1. To counteract this reaction, I have used the time for “interesting” activities as speaking tests. Although the students’ aim is to complete the task as best they can while having fun, the teacher’s aim is for the students to complete the task in English, so I instruct the students that the activity is a speaking test. If the group succeeds in the task using only English, they are awarded an “A” for the test. If they fail to use only English, they are awarded an “E”. Speaking test scores are worth 20% of the student’s final grade. While the students are completing the activity, the teacher needs to position herself in a place where she can monitor the students, which will differ according to the room and the number and position of groups around the room. If small tape recorders are available, the teacher could tape each group at this time.

Most students do not wish to fail a test, so they try very hard, especially when the only alternative is for an “A” grade for the task. Since the group only receives an “A” grade if no members are silent and all are speaking English, peer monitoring of output is high, and group members help each other if they are having trouble.

The speaking test takes 30 minutes, the first 20 minutes being for the construction of the costume and the final 10 minutes being for writing the character introduction, the reasons for making the character, and the report of how they constructed the costume. Following this group writing exercise, the groups bring their character to the front of the room and give their reports. The other groups are interested in hearing about each character and how the costumes were constructed. Finally, the homework is given (i.e. write a short story about their character), and the students write their reflections about the class, while the teacher takes attendance and records the test and presentation scores.

In the following class, students share their stories with their groups and select the best one for presentation to the class. The teacher may like to comment on use of narrative genre patterns and guide students to peer-review each other's work at this time. Although the length of the stories varies, the use of narrative genre guidelines has been consistent over the classes with which I have used this lesson, with both grammatical and style elements being used appropriately. The stories have been imaginative and presentation has been very original. Some students have constructed picture books with their stories woven throughout the pictures. Others have written their stories like letters, with an attached photocopy of a "found" letter or diary entry. Others are more conventional, but the quality has been consistently high.

## Conclusion

This lesson has proven to be highly motivating to my students in regards to their interest towards both the target culture and their English learning. I urge you to consider ways of using festivals and holidays in the classroom to teach cultures actively. Ideas for other lessons can be found online at <<http://bradford-watts.freeservers.com/photo3.html>>

## Acknowledgement

My thanks go to Jacoba Akazawa for sharing this excellent Halloween craft idea.

## References

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