Modern Japanese Art in the EFL Classroom

EFL授業の中での現代日本芸術

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Illustrations in EFL textbooks are already used as visual stimuli in controlled practice exercises for grammar or functional language points. Contemporary art, however, often has more impact on students because of its drama and intent. Given its intellectual and symbolic meanings, art also lends itself to content-based discussions with higher level students. This paper provides practical material for conversational lessons utilizing Japanese art that can be adapted to student levels ranging from false beginner to advanced. Lesson topics include future tense, comparisons, language-learning strategies, giving advice, and discussing cultural stereotypes.

サッカーをしている鎧姿の侍、江戸時代の東京に浮かぶ宇宙船、サーフしている骸骨など、これらの当惑させられる表現描写は、英語の授業に関心のない学生にも、強い衝撃を与えるに違いない。強烈なインパクトにより、見る者を引きつけ、その世界へと引き込む。この論文の目的は、芸術とEFLを融合させた実践的なレッスンプランを説明し、どう授業に応用するかを示す。比較級、外国語習得術、会話の中での助言や提案の方法、固定概念の文化的差異、未来形などの応用例を含む。

Samurai in full armor playing World Cup soccer, a spaceship hovering over Edo-era Tokyo, and a surfing skeleton? The inspiration for using such shocking imagery in the EFL classroom evolved from developing art-related materials for Japanese students about to study studio arts abroad. It soon became evident that both students and instructors could benefit from art. These arresting images grab the attention of even unmotivated students. While art students require specialist vocabulary and functional language for their studies, art itself can easily be adapted to suit the needs of non-art EFL students of all levels. It is not necessary for an instructor to know a great deal about the background of the artist or artwork, but simply to use images as a way of sparking conversation during functional EFL activities according to a predetermined language-learning goal.

Why Art?

Visual art is everywhere: Art and design are used to construct our identities and make impressions on others (Grundy, Bociek, & Parker, 2011). Just by existing in the modern world, students are "visually literate to an acute degree and highly discriminating in their tastes" (p. 7). Moreover, the art historian Chino (2003) noted that art is a "beautiful fruit but a frightening

instrument" (p. 17) in that it both represents contemporary historical and cultural values as well as influencing them for future generations. Other arts such as literature and drama make sense of human existence by portraying its grand narratives, as does visual art (Adajian, 2008). Using art develops visual literacy, or "the means of analyzing images and of uncovering the messages that they convey" (Goldstein, 2008, p. 2). Conveniently for EFL instructors, it also provides interesting and relevant input for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) lessons (Goldstein, 2008).

Specifically in EFL, the teaching of target language and grammar can be achieved via art, while the language generated can be freer than that of other activities because of art's intellectual profundity (Grundy et al., 2011). Whether used to practice language forms such as the past tense with low-level students or to debate topical issues such as post-colonialism with advanced students, visual art can complement main textbook activities. Thanks to the so-called democratization of art via digital media, any instructor can utilize an unlimited array of images from the Internet (Grundy et al., 2011). Classes can then also create online galleries (Grundy et al., 2011) for further expansion into task-based learning activities.

Why Modern Japanese Art for Japanese EFL Students?

One might wonder how looking at a pretty picture—or in the case of modern Japanese art, a cute, funny, or creepy picture (Yamaguchi Y., 2007, 2008)—can help students improve their English proficiency. In addition, it is often assumed that students should be learning about the culture of English-speaking nations in their conversational English classes. However, as the sample lesson plans which follow will show, speaking in English about something students already know enables them to quickly engage in conversational activities, that is, to both have a familiar reference point and sense of context for the situation (Wright, 2009). These images match criteria for usage including "familiarity, practicability, impact, openness to multiple interpretation, [and] opportunity for personalization" (Goldstein, 2008, p. 10). Since these particular artists intend to critique modern Japanese society and its compulsions (Helverson, 2009, in press; Kasahara, 2007; Yamaguchi Y., 2007, 2008), analyzing art at a deeper level using meaningful and authentic language (Wright, 2009) may be enlightening for anyone living within that culture.

Moreover, in Japan some students report that acquiring English provides access to different emotional expressions and identities (Burton, 2011; Kamada, 2010). Japanese art may therefore be a way to bridge the intellectual and cultural gap. Talking about a familiar subject *in English* frees students from their usual cultural rules of hierarchy such as gender and age (Burton, 2011; Sakamoto & Sakamoto, 2006), particularly when students use visual imagery as the inspiration for role-playing. This bridging furthers the development of *intelligence*, since, according to Gardner (2009), intelligence is actually a combination of numerous *skills* including linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist, and perhaps even existential intelligences. Using (Japanese) art in the classroom involves the development of spatial, linguistic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal intelligences. Nonetheless, cultural expectations and socialization affect who uses which intelligences and for what purposes (Howland, Fujimoto, Ishiwata, & Kamijo, 2009; Moran, 2009). That is to say, for example, the Japanese version of intrapersonal intelligence may differ from the British or American versions. Accessing Japanese imagery for English-language activities thereby diversifies students' intelligences.

Sample Lessons

In this section, lesson plans using specific modern Japanese artworks will be described. All of these lessons have been successfully executed with actual classes. The lesson plans include alternative suggestions so that they can be adapted to various class situations.

Lesson Plan 1: Yamaguchi Akira

- *Target:* polite requests
- *Vocabulary*: air travel
- *Grammar*: modals, prepositions of location
- *Functions:* descriptions, comparisons, purchasing a ticket, making polite requests
- *Image: Narita Kokusai Kuuko Hikoki Hyakuchinzu* [Narita International Airport: 100 Unusual Drawings of Airplanes] (Irasutore-shon, 2008, p. 15; online at Cotter, 2011)

Yamaguchi is an artist famous for his unique combination of traditional Japanese elements alongside science fiction imagery (Okabe, 2003c; Yamaguchi A., 2004), as seen in this image of a futuristic Narita airport and airplane interiors. Yamaguchi's airplanes are more like cruise ships: triple-decker monstrosities with karaoke rooms, super-spas, Noh theaters, and even Zen gardens visible alongside regular passenger seating areas. In this section I describe a particular lesson using this image in which students are taught how to make polite requests while discussing air travel.

Possible Teaching Methods

Teachers can introduce the topic by having students in groups of four design a futuristic ideal airplane and its conveniences. If time allows, their ideas can be discussed as a class. Then the students can access the image (via in-class computers or at home) to compare their ideas with the artist's. The activity can then be extended with functional language practice. For example, one student can role-play being a flight attendant, while the other is a passenger who asks, for example, "Excuse me, could you tell me where the 24-hour ATM is on this plane? I used up all of my cash at the mahjong table" or "I'd like to meditate in the garden. What are the viewing hours?" Students seem to enjoy practicing useful language patterns which are extended by their own imagination into comical examples inspired by this artwork. Another possible role-play is for one student to be a travel agent and another a customer purchasing a ticket for this plane. The customer must then specify which special facilities they would like to use and inquire about cost.

Lesson Plan 2: Yamaguchi Akira

- *Target:* giving advice
- *Vocabulary to be pre-taught*: necessary historical or cultural vocabulary
- *Grammar:* present continuous tense
- *Functions:* giving advice
- *Content-based discussion for higher-level classes:* cultural stereotypes
- *Images: Rakuchi-Rakugai, Mitsukoshii, Roppongi Hills* (online at Field of vision, 2010) and *Kaidan Yurakuzu* [Staircase of Amusements] (Yamaguchi A., 2004, pp. 23-25)

Possible Teaching Methods

For an image such as *Rakuchi-Rakugai* or *Mitsukoshi*, the teacher will have to pre-assign students certain sections of the artwork. Lower level students will enjoy searching for the relevant characters in these detailed images in "Where's Waldo" style,

during which predetermined vocabulary can be practiced. TPR (total physical response) can be utilized when one student, who has seen a portion of the artwork, orally tells the other what gestures to make to imitate its characters. They can then demonstrate poses to the class so that the other students can find the counterparts in the entire painting for comparison. When students must physically express what they have heard to others in this manner, they create a sort of memory stamp, or a highly memorable experience enabling increased retention of language studied (Ji & Dai, 2001). In addition, they will thereby experience the impulse to speak—which makes TPR so effective (Asher, 2000)—via question and answer sessions to perfect a pose.

This lesson can also be applied to more advanced students with freer conversational activities. For example, one activity is an "evil advice" comedic role-play in which a Japanese person has to give advice about Japanese culture to a foreigner he dislikes. Bad advice such as "Please don't take off your shoes. You can step right onto those straw mats covering the floor" is an example of the language generated during this activity.

Another option is an "Ignorant Foreigner" type of activity. The teacher can role play a foreign visitor who makes uninformed comments when viewing the scenes in paintings such as Yamaguchi's *Staircase of Amusements*: "Oh, look at that *samurai* standing near the ice cream shop! What flavor is that green-colored ice cream? Do samurai really eat *green* ice cream?" Students must respond politely. Note that if the students are young, they may not have enough cultural background to explain adequately, so that the lesson could be extended with out-of-class research to prepare detailed and accurate responses.

More experienced students, however, will be able to analyze this image in depth and notice, for example, that the costumes depicted therein are from a wide range of Japan's historical eras. Students' individual backgrounds will influence the degree to which they respond different scenes in this painting. For example, some first-year law majors were inspired by the image of a "Snake Woman," a kind of carnival freak depicted in this work, to research human rights and class issues in historical Japan, from which they created an academic presentation.

Because these artworks challenge assumptions about Japanese culture, they can also be used to further discussion about stereotypes students hold regarding *other* cultures. Intermediate and advanced conversational EFL textbooks often include cultural literacy components on stereotypes, which these images can complement.

Lesson Plan 3: Aida Makoto

- *Target:* language-learning strategies
- *Vocabulary*: vocabulary related to language study strategies, for example, "the best way to improve your pronunciation" or "the most difficult aspects of learning English"
- *Grammar*: superlatives
- *Function*: expressing opinions
- *Content*: the most effective language learning strategies
- *Extensions*: other silly demonstrations
- *Image: Your Pronunciation is Wrong!* (Aida, 2007, p. 160; online at Mizuma Art Gallery, 2007)

Aida is a notorious artist who tries to provoke viewers with his shocking images, most of which are too extreme for typical conversational EFL classes (Helverson, 2009; Aida, 2007; Okabe 2003a, 2003b). However, one of Aida's performance art projects lends itself perfectly to the language-learning classroom. While living in New York, Aida got so frustrated with trying to defend his controversial works in English to angry Americans who "know nothing about politics" (Okabe, 2003a, p. 9) that he staged a fake demonstration. A group of Japanese marched

to Washington Square carrying signs telling Americans to, for example, speak "properly" with no /r/ or /l/ sounds and use *katakana*-style (Japanese-style) pronunciation. The artist himself is seen in the bottom right of this image holding a placard which says, "Pronounce simply and shapely as Japanese do!!!!!"

Possible Teaching Methods

As a warm-up for this lesson, the teacher should begin a discussion in class about the most difficult points of learning English, then focus on English pronunciation for Japanese speakers. Some textbook exercises on difficult pronunciation points such as elongated vowels and so forth will prepare the students for the topic. The students can access this image and read through the signs. Are there any other signs they would add? Students can then imagine the situation in reverse: What kind of demonstration would foreigners coming to Japan create? Why? If you are teaching good-humored students at the right institution, imagining a ridiculous fake demo might be possible. One class brainstormed a demo in which they protested the poor quality and terrible taste of their institution's cafeteria food with signs that said things such as "Your overcooked rice tastes like glue paste!" While they did not go so far as to actually stage the demonstration, discussing it certainly generated a great deal of excitement, as well as language practice, during class.

Lesson Plan 4: Yanagi Miwa

- *Target:* future and conditional tenses
- *Grammar*: future tense, first and second conditionals, past conditionals
- *Function:* imaging an ideal future life, describing plans on how to achieve that ideal life, consequences
- *Extensions:* collages—each student creating a collage image of their ideal life 50 years in the future
- *Images: My Grandmothers* (online at Yanagi, 2000-2012, 2002, 2009)

Yanagi Miwa is an internationally-exhibited artist whose feminist imagery seeks to expand upon the limited roles for women in contemporary Japanese society (Helverson, in press; ART iT, 2009; Okabe, 2004). Yanagi's *My Grandmothers* series, for which the artist interviewed volunteers about their ideal life 50 years in the future and then collaborated with them on portraits representing those ideal lives (Yanagi, 2002, 2009), is easily adapted to the practice of future tense.

Possible Teaching Methods

After studying future tense in the class textbook, students can view 10 or so portraits from the *My Grandmothers* series. The teacher should preteach any difficult words according to the images students are going to access. Students are then asked to describe what they see therein, for example, "The grandmother named Yuka is going to travel around the U.S. with her young boyfriend on a motorcycle. She's going to have a sparkling diamond put onto her front tooth!" After the students have described each image, they can move on to discussion questions such as "What will your ideal life be 50 years in the future as a grandmother?" Since the artist's intention with this series is to have viewers question lifestyle choices proscribed by gender, having both male and female students imagine their lives as grand*mothers* will generate excitement. Students will thereby also have to choose the appropriate real or unreal future conditional: "When I'm a grandmother, I'll probably play pachinko," or "If I were a grandmother, I'd dye my hair purple." Discussion questions can follow, such as "What is the typical stereotype of a Japanese grandmother? How are the ideal lives shown in the photo series different for the mainstream stereotype? Are there

any themes to be found in the images?" To practice past conditionals with higher-level students, it is also possible for students to imagine their own grandparents and the ideal lives they are currently living, or would have chosen, as in "What do you think your grandmother would have done if she could have?"

Extending the lesson with interviews and image construction is also possible. Pairs of students interview each other about their ideal lives in the future, then sketch or collage images of those ideal lives to be presented to the class. Posting the images in an online class gallery makes this activity more motivating and memorable for students. This activity can be completed successfully even with false-beginner students. Yet since each *My Grandmothers* image is accompanied by personal texts, it is also possible for intermediate or advanced students to read the texts first and then write their own descriptive texts to compliment their collages.

Troubleshooting

There are four main points to consider in using these lesson plans.

1. Wright (2009) notes that an artwork must generate a sufficient amount of language to justify inclusion in the language classroom. In the case of modern Japanese art, however, students may be overwhelmed by the language inspired by such highly detailed, provocative images. To prevent students from getting distracted by unknown vocabulary, preteach vital words so that students can focus upon them during the conversational activities.
2. Students may become so excited by the striking imagery that they begin to chat in Japanese with their classmates about it. It is therefore important to focus students' attention with introductory activities and questions before viewing the images.
3. Teachers must gauge whether taboo topics may be inappropriate for younger students. Mature students, however, may be interested in extended discussion and research on issues such as the cultural imperialism, neo-nationalism, stereotypes, and gender-based discrimination depicted in these artworks.
4. Some students have preconceived notions of art as boring or as not relevant to a language classroom. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to simply display the images and begin activities without mentioning the word "art" (Grundy et al, 2011).

Another point to be made concerns issues related to copyright law: Educational access of a public online source is allowed, but photocopies of the artworks are prohibited (Grundy et al, 2011). It is, therefore, possible to project an image in the classroom for educational purposes. Most images are available at gallery websites, public image banks, or auction sites, so that access, for homework or in-class with computers, is usually quite fast and easy. The quality and detail of online images may vary, however. If extended activities are planned, the gallery representing the artist can be contacted to ask for access to an image. The gallery may be willing to forward a high-resolution image for educational use, perhaps even free of charge.

Conclusion: Art for Language Skills, Art for "Intelligences"

This paper has introduced art-based activities that enable students to access an array of intelligences for the purposes of further developing their English listening abilities, speaking skills, creativity, and cultural awareness. For Japanese students, in particular, using modern Japanese art initially provides them a certain degree of familiarity and comfort with the subject matter at hand. Students are then inspired to expand both their

visual and cultural literacy while practicing English conversation. As Goldstein (2008) noted, visual imagery is adaptable so that instructors can tailor lessons to suit a variety of student levels and needs. Extending activities with reading, writing, and task-based learning components ensures that students get adequate skill practice, according to the purposes of a particular class. Using art not only allows students to adapt to different intelligences, but rather the principles of utilizing Japanese art for EFL classes could be described as *intelligent* in themselves in that they are unlimited in their adaptability and application.

Bio Data

Gwyn Helverson has taught conversational and academic EFL courses at Kyoto University, Kyoto Seika University, and Kyoto Sangyo University. Her present position is at Ritsumeikan University. Her current research focuses upon visual literacy in the EFL classroom. Her research on Yanagi Miwa was awarded "Best Poster Presentation of the Conference" at IGALA6 and "Best of JALT" in 2010, while her paper on Japanese art was selected as "Best Original Research" by *Modern Art Asia* in 2012.

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