

Using Pop Culture to Teach HIV/AIDS Awareness

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The purpose of this paper is to show how pop culture can be used to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS. The first part focuses on a lesson taught in a university English class. Data indicate that HIV/AIDS is a problem in Japan and that there appears to be a lack of awareness of this among students. A lesson outline is then presented, followed by student feedback. The second part of the paper describes a workshop in which participants analyzed and discussed music videos and movie segments from pop culture. The focus is on the action in the videos, not the lyrics or words. The aim is to identify the main reasons why pop artists think HIV/AIDS is a problem, with a view to taking preventive action. Finally, the conclusion highlights the role that pop culture can play in raising awareness of the HIV/AIDS issue.

本稿の目的は、HIV・エイズ問題への意識を高めるために、ポップカルチャーがどのように使えるかを示すことである。背景情報に続き、本稿の第1部では、大学の英語クラスでのレッスンに焦点を当てる。HIV・エイズが日本で問題となっていることを示すデータはあるが、これに対する学生の意識は欠落しているようである。次にレッスンの概要が提示され、学生からのフィードバックがその後に表示される。第2部では、ポップカルチャーから選んだミュージックビデオや映画の一部を参加者が分析し話し合うワークショップの説明を行う。その際、歌詞やセリフではなく、登場人物の行動に注目するが、それはポップアーティストがHIV・エイズを問題だと思ふ主な理由を特定し、予防につなげるためである。最後に、ポップカルチャーがHIV・エイズ問題への意識を高める上で果たす役割を強調する結論が提示される。

HIV/AIDS is a major global issue. Education is considered to play an important role in raising awareness of the issue and in helping to take action to stop its spread. It is argued that the use of pop culture can play a role in removing the stigma that is commonly associated with the issue in Japan, which in turn helps to raise awareness and promote preventive action.

The topic of HIV/AIDS awareness is one topic in a 15-week global issues course for 2nd-year university students at the University of Electro-Communications, a national science and engineering university in Tokyo, which I have been teaching for 13 years. The broad aim of the course is for students to think critically about global issues using English pop culture. The skills of critical thinking involve three main objectives for students: to raise awareness of various current global issues, express academic (researched) opinions on a variety of global issues using sources from pop culture, and to empower students to take action. The last objective supports the view that critical thinking should be an active process in which students can take action beyond the classroom (Lucantonio, 2007). Students need to possess the knowledge and language skills to understand various issues and feel motivated to take action on them.

Pop cultural media, specifically music videos and scenes from popular movies in English can be motivational tools for students in any language classroom (Mizui, 2007). However, teachers do not need to have any expert knowledge of pop culture to use these resources. Music videos and movies are readily available for teachers to view and analyze through a Google search, on iTunes, on YouTube, or on television channels that show music videos such as the US Top 20 on MTV. Although it may require some time on the part of the teacher to research and analyze the materials beforehand, it is time well spent when the goal is fostering student motivation and developing skills of critical thinking. Also, the videos and movies are reusable. Although pop songs tend to get old fairly quickly, the global issues that are referred to in the music videos stay relevant for much longer.

In addition to motivation, students can discover that many artists in pop culture have strong opinions about a variety of global issues including HIV/AIDS, and these opinions are often expressed by the action in their music videos, not necessarily by the lyrics of the song being played (Lucantonio, 2007; Mizui, 2007). Music videos are often made for a purpose that is different from that of the lyrics. The videos are often designed to tell a story or express views that are unrelated to the song (Lucantonio, 2007; Mizui, 2007). Hence, the selected music videos are those that illustrate the artists' opinions by what is

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going on in the video, not by the lyrics of the song being played. At times, the actions can be quite graphic, concretely illustrating the artists' views on the topic. By designing tasks that focus on actions rather than words, students can be readily guided into identifying the artists' opinions on a wide range of issues (Lucantonio, 2007). Students can then use these to help construct arguments to support their own opinions, which they are required to do for homework and presentations. Using videos from pop culture in this way can be both a motivational tool for students and a useful language resource for constructing arguments (Lucantonio, 2007; Mizui, 2007).

In the following sections, the paper focuses on a lesson taught in a 2nd-year university English course with lower level students. Data concerning HIV/AIDS in Japan and a description of the lesson plan are first presented, together with some student feedback. This is followed by a description of a workshop in which participants analyzed pop culture videos with a view to understanding how these can be used to raise awareness of the HIV/AIDS issue.

A Lesson on HIV/AIDS HIV/AIDS in Japan

Data indicate that HIV/AIDS is a problem in Japan. Although the number of reported cases of both HIV infection and AIDS has largely leveled off worldwide since 2008 and 2010, both continue to increase in Japan (UNAIDS, 2016). In 2015, 435 new cases of HIV/AIDS were reported in Tokyo alone (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2007), with more cases suspected but as yet unreported. The dominant route of transmission in Japan is said to be sexual contact and, although the majority of cases are from homosexual contact, HIV/AIDS can affect anyone, regardless of sexual orientation (UNAIDS, 2016). Furthermore, 70% of all individuals infected by HIV in Japan are in their 20s and 30s ("New HIV carriers," 2015; UNAIDS, 2016). These data indicate that HIV/AIDS in Japan is a problem among the age groups typically associated with university students.

These findings highlight the necessity for extensive campaigns to raise public awareness on the sexual transmission of HIV and the expansion of early detection and treatment programs because no decline has yet been observed in the number of AIDS cases ("New HIV carriers," 2015; UNAIDS, 2016). Teachers and the public in general need to take an interest in HIV/AIDS prevention and act accordingly (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2007), with an emphasis on the role of education in raising awareness.

According to the data, some of the main reasons for the increase in HIV/AIDS infection in Japan include a lack of awareness of the issue, a lack of education about the issue,

a lack of protection against HIV/AIDS, a lack of testing, the frequency of new sex partners, and the closed attitude of Japanese society towards openly confronting the issue (Bull, 2009; "New HIV carriers," 2015; UNAIDS, 2016).

Planning the Lesson

The goals of the lesson are for students to think critically and to give academic opinions as to why HIV/AIDS is a growing problem in Japan. Critical thinking is addressed by developing the students' ability to construct a logical argument. Academic opinions are those that use resources to support the arguments. These can be resources presented in the class, such as those derived from pop culture, or other original resources students find through their own research. Through this critical thinking process, awareness of the issue is raised as well as is knowledge about what needs to be done to take preventive action.

Scaffolding is an important issue when teaching lower level students. Scaffolding is a complex process (Gibbons, 2002) but in this paper it refers to a decision-making process used by the teacher, who breaks down new or difficult vocabulary and concepts into manageable chunks in order to facilitate student learning. Scaffolding is accomplished through the use of a checklist that identifies the following criteria: the complexity of the task of identifying reasons for HIV/AIDS, the use of teacher explanations and student group discussions, and most importantly, a focus on the actions going on in the music videos and movies instead of on the complex lyrics.

The lesson is conducted in English. Students are initially given an abridged version of the data from the UNAIDS (2016) report and *The Japan Times* (Bull, 2009; "New HIV carriers," 2015). The articles themselves are presented, but the relevant data in each article is underlined for students. These data indicate that HIV/AIDS is a problem in Japan, particularly among young people in their 20s and 30s. Students are then given a checklist of five common reasons why HIV/AIDS is a problem (see Appendix). These reasons have been derived from the data and pop culture. New vocabulary and key concepts that are likely to cause difficulty are briefly explained by the teacher and discussed by students in groups.

The teacher then gives a brief explanation in English of the content of the videos before playing each. Then, using the checklist as a guide, students analyze and discuss the main points of two short segments from the movie *Philadelphia* (Demme & Saxon, 1993, with Japanese subtitles) and two music videos (see Table 1). The aim is for students to identify the artists' views about why HIV/AIDS is a problem. They do this by focusing on the action in the videos, not the lyrics of the songs. For homework, students formu-

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late their own opinions about why HIV/AIDS is a problem in Japan, which is the main purpose of the lesson. Although students are free to use their own original resources to support their arguments, most choose to draw from the data and pop culture examples they have analyzed in class. Finally, in the following lesson, students present their opinions by doing a mingling activity with other students and exchanging views. In the mingling activity, students start by giving and receiving opinions in pairs and then move around the room, changing pairs and exchanging opinions with as many students as possible within a time limit of approximately 20 minutes. The teacher's role is to move around the class, listen to the students' opinions, and check the written homework outlines. These are then collected and assessed based on how well students have constructed an academic opinion.

Student Feedback

I have been teaching the topic of HIV/AIDS as part of the global issues course four times a year since 2004. Therefore, I estimate that approximately 2,600 course reviews for the global issues course have been completed and feedback received for all of the topics. In one question, students are asked what they liked about the course. In another question they are asked if they have any other comments. The feedback from students about the HIV/AIDS lessons has been consistently positive, even though AIDS is regarded as somewhat of a taboo issue in schools and universities in Japan. The students have done a course review and also chose topics for their class presentations.

In the course reviews, students have often stated that they did not know that HIV/AIDS was a problem in Japan and that they had never thought about getting tested. Students have been asked if they have had a class or classes on HIV/AIDS in Japan in junior or senior high school or at university and if they have had such a class, if they thought it was enough. Most have indicated that they had either no education on the issue or that it was not enough. Students have said that they appreciate knowing about the issue and welcomed the chance to talk about it in class even though they felt somewhat shy to do so. Importantly, students have also stated that using pop culture helped them, as they felt "close" to pop culture. I interpreted this to mean that they felt a certain connection to it, which helped them to be more at ease, less inhibited, and more motivated to discuss the issue. Even though many were not very familiar with pop culture outside of Japan, it was an area they were interested in and it motivated them to know more about the issue of HIV/AIDS.

Presentations are an important part of student assessment. As this is a content-based course, students present on any one of the topics covered in the syllabus. HIV/AIDS

awareness has consistently been one of the most popular topics. This suggests that despite the taboos attached to HIV/AIDS, students have welcomed the chance to discuss the topic, as well as recognized its importance and relevance.

Some students have decided to take action as a result of the lesson. Students have voluntarily sent me personal testimonies of follow-up action they have taken. These include taking an HIV/AIDS test for the first time, writing about the experience of doing so, and encouraging other students to do likewise. Furthermore, some students have undertaken volunteer work. A short video of one such student was shown at the conclusion of the workshop described below. In the video, the student explained how she accompanied a doctor on certain nights to Roppongi, where a mobile testing clinic was set up. The student encouraged passers-by to be tested. She felt strongly about the need for more people to take an HIV/AIDS test as many feel the issue has nothing to do with them, even though the number of infections continues to rise in Japan. Feedback such as this suggests that not only has awareness been raised but also that in some cases, the students act on that awareness.

The Workshop: Analyzing Pop Culture Videos

Participants were shown a segment from a music video by Lady Gaga based on her song *Bad Romance* (Germanotta & Khayat, 2009). The video focuses on reckless sexual activity, as in the video Lady Gaga has been sold as a sex slave to the Russian mafia. It was explained that Lady Gaga has visited Japan on several occasions to talk about the issue of sex in relation to HIV/AIDS ("Lady Gaga pitches" 2011). According to Lady Gaga, people have become careless and are not using the protection of a condom during sex. In addition, she feels there is a closed attitude in Japan towards the issue. People do not want to talk openly about HIV/AIDS either in schools or in the community and this contributes to the problem.

Following this, participants were given the checklist (see Appendix) of five possible reasons why HIV/AIDS is a problem in Japan. The participants watched two music videos and two segments from a movie (see Table 1) and used the checklist to identify the main reasons given by each artist. It was the same task given to students, although students got additional scaffolding. By identifying the reasons for the problem, the participants (and the students in the same activity) also pinpointed what needs to be done in order to take preventive action to stop HIV/AIDS.

Workshop participants then discussed the reasons they had identified in each of the videos. Results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Workshop Summary of Reasons for HIV/AIDS

Video type / name	Title	Main reasons for HIV/AIDS
Music / Lil Wayne	<i>How to Love</i> (Lil Wayne, 2011, track 1)	Unprotected sex Little or no education of HIV/AIDS
Movie / <i>Philadelphia</i> (Demme, & Saxon, 1993)	Segment 1. Why fired? Segment 2. Why refuse HIV test?	Closed attitude (social discrimination: he has AIDS) Closed attitude (social discrimination: “not me”)
Music & Interview / Teru, Glay	<i>HIV/AIDS Awareness</i> (AC Japan, 2007, track 1)	Little or no testing

In his music video of the song, *How to Love*, the popular rap artist Lil Wayne (2011, track 1), gives his reasons for why HIV/AIDS is a problem by presenting two versions of the same story. In the first version, the woman is infected with HIV because of reckless, unprotected sexual activity involving a frequent change of partners. In the second version, the same woman simply becomes pregnant and is not infected with HIV. She uses the protection of a condom and does not change partners. Education also plays a role. In the end the woman thanks her mother for “teaching” her how to love. Workshop participants agreed that the artist’s main opinion of why HIV/AIDS is a problem is the lack of protection during sex and the lack of knowledge or education about contracting the virus. By highlighting these reasons, Lil Wayne is also focusing on what needs to be done to combat the virus, that is, the need for protection and the importance of education.

The movie, *Philadelphia* (Demme & Saxon, 1993), was one of the first movies to talk openly about HIV/AIDS, in particular the issue of social discrimination towards the disease. The participants were shown two brief segments that reflect the main points of the movie. In the first segment, Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks) is fired from his job because his bosses guess he has the AIDS virus. The participants watched the segment and then had group discussions about the reasons why Andrew was fired. This was the same task given to students in the class described above. The participants agreed that the main point of the first segment was social discrimination, in that he was unfairly fired simply because he has the virus.

In the second segment, Joe Miller (played by Denzel Washington) goes to see his doctor because he fears he might have contracted the virus by simply talking to Andrew

Beckett. The doctor suggests Joe should take an HIV/AIDS test but he refuses, laughing at the doctor and saying that he does not need one. The participants watched the segment and then discussed in groups why Joe refused the AIDS test. This, too, was the same task given to students. Although there was more debate about the main point of the second segment, the consensus was that the “not me” attitude of Joe was an example of closed attitude, which can be viewed as a kind of social discrimination. By not taking the test, he implies that he is immune to catching the disease because he is not gay and only gay people need to be tested. However, as data show, HIV/AIDS can affect anyone, regardless of one’s sexual orientation.

Finally, the participants were shown a video produced by the Ad Council of Japan (2008) featuring Teru, the vocalist of the Japanese pop group, Glay. In the video, Teru is interviewed while taking a HIV/AIDS test to raise awareness of the issue in Japan (AC Japan, 2007). Teru stresses the importance of testing, stating that HIV/AIDS is a problem in Japan and very few people seem to get tested. By taking the test, he shows that testing involves a simple blood test and is easy to do. The Ad Council of Japan (2007) also made a poster of Teru taking the test, in order to promote the issue of testing and HIV/AIDS awareness. The workshop participants analyzed the video and the poster. They unanimously agreed that Teru’s main point is that the lack of HIV/AIDS testing in Japan contributes to the problem and that more people should get tested as a preventive measure, regardless of their sexual orientation.

The participants had little to no trouble identifying a range of relevant reasons from each of the videos. Using the checklist of five reasons as a guide, the participants agreed that the artists’ main reasons were fairly easy to identify, as the reasons were concretely defined by the action going on in each of the videos. By using a checklist and focusing on what was happening in the videos, the complexity of the task was broken down and simplified. This was done to demonstrate to the participants ways in which they could scaffold the tasks for students. This is an example of scaffolding the language as well as the complexity of the learning task (Gibbons, 2002). Gibbons argued that this is particularly important when teaching real-world issues to students of mixed ability or lower proficiency levels.

Conclusion

One of the transformations in language education has been a shift towards topics that more broadly reflect the reality of the world in which we live. HIV/AIDS is an important real-world issue and education plays a significant role both in raising awareness of the issue and in taking preventive measures.

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By using pop culture to teach HIV/AIDS awareness, the stigma and taboo nature that is often associated with the issue can be reduced. By accessing pop culture from sites such as Google, MTV, iTunes, or YouTube, many resources can be found that are easily accessible for teachers to use in the classroom. Although these may take some time to find and to analyze for teaching purposes, it is time well spent in terms of student motivation and fostering the skills of critical thinking. Not only can student awareness of this global issue be raised, but also the motivation and initiative to take preventive action.

Bio Data

Damian Lucantonio is an associate professor at the University of Electro-Communications, a national science university in Tokyo. He has a PhD in applied linguistics and has taught in all areas of English language education in Australia, Indonesia, and Japan. His research interests focus on the applications of systemic functional linguistics to English language education, in particular, genre theory. <damian@bunka.uec.ac.jp>

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Appendix

Checklist: Five Common Reasons Why HIV/AIDS Is a Problem in Japan

- Little or no testing
- Little or no education or awareness
- Closed attitude of society (social discrimination: “not me”)
- Little or no protection (condoms)
- Too much sexual freedom