

Uncovering Culture Inside the Classroom: A Look at Language

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Agar (1994) coined the word *languaculture* to highlight the inseparability of language and culture. He explained the connection by suggesting that culture is something that “happens” when people are learning to communicate in another language. In this paper, languaculture is presented as a natural learning process that may be exploited for classroom use. First an outside-the-classroom languaculture journey is described using images from archaeology: discovery, excavation, analysis, and archiving. This process is then explored as a way to enrich foreign language education inside the classroom. Although time and curricular constraints of English education in Japan often make it difficult to add culture to lesson plans, the lexical elements themselves can be used as effective tools to help students uncover culture. When culture does happen, students will have an opportunity to deepen their vocabulary knowledge and further develop their appreciation of difference.

Agarはlanguacultureという造語をつくり出し、言語(language)と文化(culture)の切り離せない関係性に焦点をあてた(1994)。文化とは人々が別の言語で伝えることを学ぶ際に「起こる」ものであることを示すことで、この関係性を説明している。本論では、Languacultureを実際の教室で利用することができる自然な学習プロセスとして、紹介している。はじめに、教室外でのlanguacultureの過程を、発見・発掘・分析・記録保管といった考古学のイメージを用いて論じている。次に、このプロセスの教室内での外国語教育を豊かにする可能性について探っている。日本では英語教育に充てられた時間とカリキュラム上の縛りがあるために、普段の授業計画に文化の項目を上乗せするのは容易ではないが、語彙の学習そのものが、学生が文化を掘りおこすのに効果的な手段となりえる。実際に文化が「起こる」とき、学生は自らの語彙知識を深め、さらに文化の違いを認識する力を伸ばす機会を手にするのである。

Twenty-five years ago, Michael Agar (1994) published *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*, noting that an age of increasing interaction among diverse peoples was an opportune time to present academic insights about language and culture to a more general audience. Deeper understanding about differences could, he thought, help mitigate the risks of conflict. Agar coined the uncomplicated yet elusive word *languaculture* to make explicit the essential connectedness of the concepts, and he filled his book with stories that detail how experiences of culture shock are often linked to language. Similarly, when we examine language in action, it is often culture that surfaces.

According to Agar (1994), “Part...of the trip from LC1 [languaculture one] to LC2 [languaculture two]

is a piece of cake” (p. 248). Some words in LC1 have a rather straightforward equivalent in LC2. However, part of the trip, the “rich” part, is more complicated to navigate. It is this tricky part that has the power to impress. Although Agar encountered transformative languaculture through immersion in the world outside the classroom, for example as an LC2 novice in Mexico and as an LC2 veteran in Austria, young foreign language learners in Japan may be able to experience an Agar-like trip through deeper engagement with the vocabulary of language lessons.

Before looking at how such engagement might work, it may be helpful to follow the kind of “trip from LC1 to LC2” that Agar described. Although he presented a three-stage journey he called MAR (mistake, awareness, repair), I will share a story of my own using four phases: rich point, investigation, konnections, and upload. Agar’s model imagery is one of oceans (Spanish, *mar*), sailors and immigrants, while mine is of land (Japanese, *riku*) and archaeology. Although my example story is also an outside-the-classroom languaculture adventure, my use of this four-phase model promoting on-site languacultural excavation may suggest how to move this kind of journey inside.

An Outside-the-Classroom Languaculture Journey

Rich Point

Soon after my son entered his first year of public junior high school, he chose volleyball as his *bukatsu*, his club. The word *bukatsu* is written in Japanese as 部活, with the first character referring to a group and the second connoting a way of living. Once my son joined the volleyball club, our family began to experience *bukatsu* for the first time, and a number of *rich points* (Agar, 1994) - languacultural occasions of confusion - emerged for me, notably the language used by club members to describe and sometimes address each other: *sempai* and *kōhai*.

I had often heard these words and knew their basic dictionary meanings. *Sempai* means somebody older than you while *kōhai* means somebody younger. However, despite knowing both these words,

I had never had an occasion to actually use them. Nor had I heard them much in my house until our dinner conversations were suddenly seasoned with them. When I asked my son what he did at club one day, he responded, “We learned the names and uniform numbers of the sempai and made a special cheer for each.” When I asked him about practice, he often answered like this: “Great. Takizawa-sempai said my serves are getting better.” Though I could follow my son’s stories without difficulty, I nevertheless felt lost. Something was happening that I did not expect and could not explain. In Agar’s language, none of the *frames*, the sets of situation expectations that usually helped me organize and understand my experiences, could create a clear picture from these sempai and kōhai scenes.

Investigation

My excavation of the languacultural site started with the words themselves. Sempai is written as 先輩, with the first character a very simple one meaning ahead, and the second a less common one meaning group, gang, or bunch. Similarly, kōhai is written as 後輩, meaning after or behind group. Rather than simply indicating a person’s age, these words seemed linked with a group experience. In order for someone to be my sempai, we would have to identify as members of the same group, e.g., my sempai in the volleyball club or my sempai in a particular junior high school.

I then began to notice how each grade in the club is connected with a series of activities and events, like orientation, cheering, acting as linesmen, receiving uniforms, or playing in a 7th-grade tournament for the first-year students. Second- and third-year students have their own sets of activities, rights, and responsibilities. Club members are defined less by ability and more by group identity, that is, by class year. True to its name, a club (部活) may teach more about group life than about any specific activity.

When I tried to confirm my new understanding by collecting data from native speakers, I was again told that a sempai was simply somebody older. As I pressed for more details, however, there was general agreement about a group connection, though the point was made that junior high school students usually only meet others in group situations. Naturally, then, there is almost always a context to support student use of the terms. My sources added that outside the school situation, the words themselves are less common, though sempai/kōhai thinking remains. In working situations, relative ages of workers obviously can influence how people communicate with each other, but length of expe-

rience in a particular setting is also noted, as the word dōki (同期, meaning to enter the company in the same year) suggests. Age may often correspond to years of experience, which makes things simpler, but when it does not, a younger person may be an older person’s sempai in the office.

Konnections

Agar (1994) suggested that a “problematic bit of language is puttied thickly into far-reaching networks of association and many situations of use” (p. 100), so that when such a language element is lifted up for examination, other interesting material comes with it. As I thought more deeply about sempai/kōhai, I noticed something else at the same languacultural site: bowing. Not only did the club members bow to the teacher at the beginning and end of practice and to the opposing team at a game, they also bowed to the gym itself. When I observed practices with other parents, the club members bowed to us and then turned to face an otherwise empty gym and bowed again. They also bowed individually when they entered or left the gym.

Bowing is a nonlinguistic form of communication. However, I sensed it might fit nicely within my new frame, my new understanding of the sempai/kōhai scene. Like sempai, the gym watches a new group enter and begin a process of growth that it has witnessed before. The walls do not instruct and scold as sempai do, but they bear the marks of experience and help create each group’s identity. Although this is a tentative, incomplete, evolving understanding—a kind of interlanguaculture—bowing to everyday spaces makes sense when those places have helped shape and bind together generations of bukatsu members.

Upload

As with all insights that originate in specific research projects, the data from one excavation site can be uploaded to our centralized database so it can be accessed later when tackling other questions. For example, university students have initiated class discussions about the practice of grade skipping in the United States. Before thinking deeply about the sempai/kōhai system, I had simply considered grade skipping a reasonable possibility in cases where a student was significantly academically advanced. Now, I have a new frame, a repaired one in the MAR model, in storage that I can use to try to make sense of other differences. I can understand that from a sempai/kōhai perspective, mastery of content is perhaps less important than collective linear progression through a series of well-orga-

nized experiences. Though a single point of culture cannot explain an educational policy, Japan's very limited use of grade skipping makes more sense after considering the confusion and challenges that might arise among students when ages do not neatly correspond with life experiences.

Culture Inside the Classroom

The above RIKU exploration of sempai/kōhai is different from the languaculture exploration that is possible for Japanese foreign language students inside the classroom. Students likely have few chances to use language and discover rich points, limited time and human resources for investigations, and little guidance or motivation to make and store connections among data and across topics. In some classroom situations, the response to such constraints is to import culture in either simple or sophisticated ways. However, another way may be to explore the textbook or lesson language in news ways in order to create chances for small but memorable cultural encounters.

Importing Culture

Culture is often introduced in classrooms in non-systematic, explicit, and additive ways like textbook culture boxes. At other times, particularly in language classes for specific communicative purposes like English for business or tourism, language and culture are naturally more integrated. These two approaches to culture in the classroom are attractive, partly because they can be relatively easy for teachers to use. However, both usually fall short of providing an opportunity to experience culture as something more than what people have or do. (See Chen & Le, 2019) Neither necessarily promotes a deeper experience of culture as something that happens to people when they personally engage with difference (Agar, 1994).

A focus on real engagement with difference is, of course, not new in foreign language education. Byram has been writing on the topic, principally from a European perspective, for over 30 years and is known especially for his intercultural communicative competence model (1997). This model highlights the need for language teachers to foster five cultural competences (*savoirs*), which include knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical awareness. However, its limitations have also been identified. In addition to citing the several problems connected to Byram's use of national images of culture, Chen and Le (2019) noted that "for teachers who require practical pedagogical strategies, the model is of little use when it does not model the interaction or

predict outcomes" (p. 49). In addition, the curriculum and teacher training changes necessary to bring this model fully into classrooms are beyond the reach of most English teachers. Moreover, even some practical suggestions like Moran's (2001) four-stage cultural experience, which includes creating opportunities for students to participate directly or indirectly in cultural practices, require materials beyond what textbooks generally provide and are unrealistic as a regular part of busy language classrooms in Japan.

Uncovering Culture

Most language classrooms naturally have an abundance of words. Teachers, by reflecting on their own experiences and by honing their own excavation techniques, can help students engage with words and flip these languacultural coins to experience the other side.

It is the work of Kramersch on cultural learning, largely in foreign language classrooms in the United States, that may offer support for this approach to uncovering culture inside the classroom. Kramersch is widely recognized for the idea of a third place (1993) as a main learning outcome in foreign language education. With this concept, she highlighted both the "paradox" of students "discovering their own national, ethnic, and personal identity" through a foreign language and also the "dilemma" (pp. 256-257) of teachers who must embody local and foreign values while encouraging students to discover their own. More recently, Kramersch (2011) proposed that the third place "must be seen less as a PLACE than as a symbolic PROCESS of meaning-making that sees beyond the dualities of national languages (L1-L2) and national cultures (C1-C2)" and suggested that symbolic competence is now a better way to express the "systematic reflexive component" (p. 355) that can complement communicative competence in foreign language classrooms.

In an interview in *The Language Teacher* in 2014, Kramersch offered this concise definition of symbolic competence: "an awareness of what words index or connote in a particular context of use, and the ability to reframe these words when used in a different context" (Hourdequin, 2014, p. 10). She suggested that this awareness and ability "can be fostered in the classroom by systematic attention to the words chosen by speakers or writers instead of other words they could have chosen and the different values indexed by different words, for example, the difference between calling a difficulty a *challenge* versus a *problem*" (p. 10). This definition and example make the awareness and ability objectives of symbolic competence seem

perhaps suitable for university-level literature courses but hardly appropriate for secondary school English classes or even many general education university courses in Japan. However, a first step toward symbolic competence may be simply an experience of language-in-context, Kramsch's term for languaculture.

Words are not freestanding; they are part of a system of meanings which is the context and the culture. Studying authentic texts, where words may have been chosen for multiple levels of meaning rather than for instructional purposes, is one way for students to use words to access culture in the classroom, but it is not the only way. Utilizing vocabulary development strategies that encourage students to network words broadly and deeply can also uncover culture.

A Look at Language

My sempai/kōhai languaculture story may perhaps be understood as an individually-directed four-stage process of network discovery. However, this way of looking at language to uncover culture can, at least at first, work well in a group setting and in less than a full cycle.

Students, especially those who are new to the study of English, cannot be expected to find a rich point from a vocabulary list and immediately start investigating it by themselves. They need time and guidance first to link language and culture generally and then to open themselves to the possibility of confusion. Teachers in junior high school can occasionally take time to pause over a vocabulary word and pose a question. For example, simple open questions could be asked about basic words. Why doesn't the word *sister* include information about age? Why do you think some people prefer the prefix *Ms*? How does the color *yellow* make you feel? These questions cannot be answered definitively and teachers can choose not to offer answers at all, but gradually students may come to view textbook definitions as word introductions, not conclusions.

Teachers should also consider pausing long enough to share personal languaculture stories. In the *TLT* interview, Kramsch promoted storytelling: "To the extent that students are ready to hear their teacher's experiences, and to the extent that teaching a foreign language is meant to help students see the world from a different perspective, then teachers have a responsibility to tell their students about their own experiences with language and culture" (Hourdequin, 2014, p.9). While many teachers may naturally tell stories connected to textbook topics, they can reshape them in order to tie them more explicitly to the language of the lesson. In this way,

they will not only motivate students but will also model the languaculture process.

Gently cultivating languaculture awareness with questions and occasional stories may be all some teachers can do, and that can make a difference. However, when possible, teachers should take other steps that might help students develop the ability to take a more active role in the RIKU process. Teachers could, for example, select rich words, ones likely to yield memorable discoveries, to use in classroom activities that include access to excavation techniques. Junior high school textbooks often introduce dictionary use, and lessons regularly include sessions with assistant language teachers (ALTs). Investigations that involve work with dictionaries, collocation dictionaries, and learner corpora or promote interaction with various English speakers are opportunities for culture to happen.

Making and storing connections are perhaps more challenging but still possible. With university students, I have created online class glossaries where interaction can help fuel the RIKU process throughout a semester. Students receive guidance about choosing words (for example, Academic Word List words, general or technical words) from class reading materials (provided to or chosen by students) and about writing entries that include form, meaning, and use (Nation, 2001). By focusing on these points, students naturally start an investigation. I also encourage them to add an original note which may be a mnemonic aid or an encounter story. Moreover, this glossary includes a comment function, so I and other students can freely add to the definitions or ask questions. There is an opportunity to explore context and culture more deeply and to recognize difference. There is a chance to make connections among words in a particular text and to use those insights later to try to make sense of new texts. Using Google documents to share texts can work in a similar way. Students can begin the RIKU process using the comment function to ask questions or share information about words. Last semester, students used this kind of activity to weave self-esteem into an impressive web of meaning. Culture does not happen with every word, but vocabulary growth does. Therefore, this model of languaculture learning seems a worthwhile small stream of any syllabus.

Conclusion

This look at language does not replace other ways of presenting culture. Many students are curious about foreign countries and find cultural information motivating, so importing culture into classrooms and providing immersion opportunities outside

classrooms remain important. However, teachers can help make culture happen inside the classroom efficiently and effectively by promoting active engagement (RIKU) with lesson language. Second language learning necessarily involves memorization of large quantities of linguistic and cultural information, but it also requires occasional small experiences that help students frame and reframe their world. More engagement with words will both deepen student vocabulary knowledge and also strengthen the critical thinking and reflection skills students need to become more accepting of themselves and of differences now and in the future.

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[RESOURCES] TLT WIRED



Paul Raine

In this column, we explore the issue of teachers and technology—not just as it relates to CALL solutions, but also to Internet, software, and hardware concerns that all teachers face. We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

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Collaborative Reading: Choose Your Own Adventure with Google Slides

Thomas Entwistle

The British Council, Japan

Choose your own adventure stories, also known as *secret path* stories, are where the reader becomes the main protagonist in the adventure. The stories are often written from a

second-person point of view and the reader is given options on where to take the story next. Children of the 80s and 90s like myself will probably recall reading such books when we were younger. More recently, teachers in Japan may be aware of the popular *Atama-ii Choose Your Own Adventure* graded reader series. These books are helpful in engaging lower level learners and reluctant readers, promoting critical thinking, fostering autonomous learning, and providing students with a fun and positive reading experience in English (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998).

Google Slides

Google Slides is a free online presentation programme offered alongside the full Google Suite. It lets users put together presentations online and

is usable on all smart devices, tablets, laptops, and computers. For those used to using PowerPoint, it will look very familiar and navigating around the programme is also very intuitive. The only possible limitation for teachers is that you need a Gmail account to access Google Slides and get creating.

My Adventure Story

In the story I made for my class, students had to go on an adventure through the typical day of a student in our university department. The students had to choose the correct options to progress.

However, if they made the wrong choice, they had to start again. In most scenarios, students had a fifty-fifty chance to choose the correct path when there were no clues accompanying the options. For example:

- **Question:** You have some free time before class and need to do some homework. Where's the best place to study?
- **Option one:** The university library
- **Option two:** The communal study area

This forced students to discuss what might be the possible advantages and disadvantages of each option. This was achieved because, early in the story, the students were tricked with a few "red herrings" where the seemingly obvious correct choice was, in fact, the wrong choice. For example:

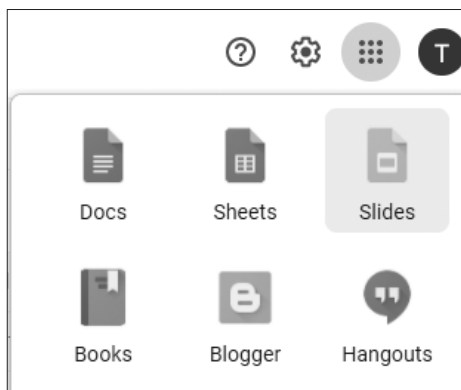
- **Question:** You are almost at the station but maybe you need to run. However, your bag is really heavy because of all your textbooks. What do you do?
- **Option one:** Walk quickly
- **Option two:** Run

Most students chose the option to run, when actually walking quickly was the correct choice. Running led them to trip over and hurt themselves, thus missing the train, missing class, and failing the semester. The students then had to start the story again. Student pairs and groups appeared to have fun competing with each other as they tried to successfully complete this adventure story, something that Dörnyei (2001) states can add to student motivation. From observing their engagement with this adventure story, this type of reading could have a positive effect on developing their English competencies.

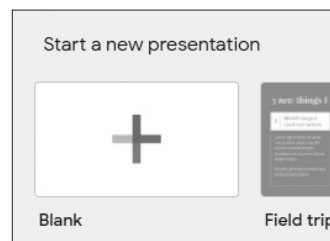
How to Create an Adventure Story?

If you have a Gmail account, or have just set one up, you are ready. Below are the simple steps you need to create your own adventure story.

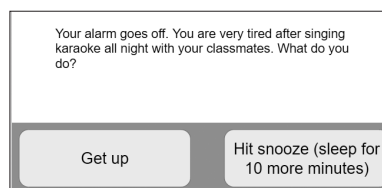
Step One: From your Gmail account, click on the *Google Apps* button in the top right of your web browser and select the *Slides* icon (you may need to scroll down to locate it).

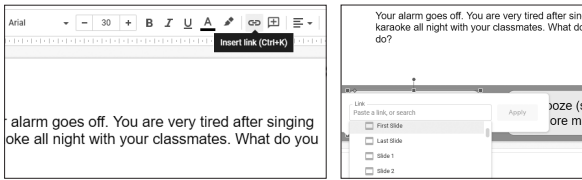


Step Two: On the main page select *Blank* to start a new presentation from scratch. Alternatively, you can browse some of the templates. However, I found most weren't suitable.

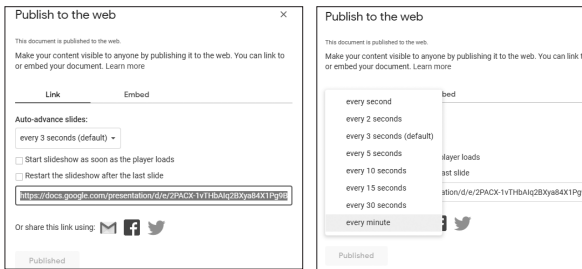


Step Three: Start creating your own adventure. The way I laid my slides out was to split each slide in half, with the lines of the story and accompanying question on the top half and the options on how to proceed on the bottom. Use shapes (*Insert, Shapes*) for the different options the students can take. Once you've inserted a shape, double click on it and start typing. These boxes will be the "buttons" that your students will click in order to proceed to the next part of the story. Note: make sure the shapes are large enough because, if the students miss the button and press the screen by mistake, it will knock the slides out of order in the story.





Step Four: Once you have your questions and options arranged the way you want, select one of the boxes and click the *Insert link* icon. Then, select the slide you wish the box to link to. For example, if the box is the correct answer, you might then link it to the next slide. If it is the incorrect answer, it might link back to the starting slide.



Step Five: Once your adventure story is finished, it is time to either share the link with your students or create a QR code for them to scan, which is how I presented my story. Go to *File*, then *Publish to the web* to get your link. I advise setting *auto-advance slides* to one minute (the maximum value) to give your students time to discuss each slide.

Note that you can convert your link into a QR code for free at <https://qr-code-generator.com>.

Observations

I observed that even the lower level and reluctant students found the collaborative nature of reading the story together rewarding and gave them a sense of achievement, something that Klingner and Vaughn (1998) also found with collaborative reading group tasks. Also, students gave some pretty glowing feedback to the activity. Comments like, “It was fun” and “I liked it” were pleasing to receive. The comment, “I don’t like reading, in Japanese also, but this was good” was probably the most positive.

Things to Consider

Although it is easy to create your own story via Google Slides, it can get a little complicated linking everything up. For example, my story contained 54 slides with 74 buttons that all needed to be linked. However, now that it has been created, trialed,

edited, and used with students, it is a great resource that I can use year after year.

If you don’t have the time to create your own story, there are other ways in which Google Slides can be used. Here are a few simple ideas that also work well:

- True or false exercises
- A class orientation checklist
- Simple quizzes
- Concept checking
- Vocabulary matching (e.g., synonyms, suffixes or prefixes, picture match for young learners, etc.)

Conclusion

This simple-to-create reading exercise was engaging, motivating, and fun for the students. It was quite a different type of task than they were used to, which seemed to increase their interest, something which Lightbown & Spada (2015) also observed when introducing different tasks to students. As mentioned before, the collaborative aspect of the task led to lively discussions and the adventure story provided learners with a greater sense of agency in how the story unfolds, which could enhance students’ intrinsic “autonomous motivation” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p.182). Finally, feedback from the students was very positive, so I highly recommend incorporating this technology into the classroom.

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