



Tips for Teachers

Music Culture Assimilators

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Year after year our Japanese university conversation students ask for two things: popular music and culture (which often means, “What’s happening in America today?”). The problems of working these things into prepared lessons and deriving something educational from them can deter many teachers from responding to such requests. However, by adapting an established technique referred to as “culture assimilators” we have come up with an activity which satisfies our desire to teach substance as well as our students’ desire to learn about music and culture.

In the traditional culture assimilator, a cross-cultural interaction (for example, between an American and a representative of the target culture) is described in which the American is puzzled or upset. Students read and then select one of four plausible explanations for the target culture behavior. After selecting an option, students turn to a page explaining why one choice is clearly a better explanation than the others. Students enjoy testing their understanding of the foreign culture, and their interest is piqued through the quiz.

In our adaptation, *music* culture assimilators, we begin by presenting a contemporary popular song. We briefly introduce the song on the board, mentioning title, recording artist, and topic or inherent message of the song. An example follows:

“Everybody Hurts”

R. E. M. won a 1994 Grammy Award for this song.

They say that all of us have problems and that

we should feel sorry for others in trouble.

Students are provided with a copy of the song lyrics and the Japanese translation to save the need for lengthy explanations. In Japan we have collected many lyrics plus translations from issues of the *Japan Student Times* and *Asahi Weekly*. Western CD’s sold in Japan also include lyrics and translations.

We next play the song, usually on video. This allows students to observe the singer's face and body language and for students less interested in language or a particular song to receive information through the visual presentation.

After viewing the video, students are asked to answer a question related to the topic or theme of the song. An example follows for "Everybody Hurts."

When a Westerner tells you his bad news ("My mother died." "My child is sick." "I lost my job," etc.), you should: (Circle the best answer.)

- a. laugh loudly.*
- b. say nothing*
- c. say you are sorry if you feel truly sorry for him.*
- d. always say you are sorry even if you don't feel sorry.*

The best choice and an explanation follow on the lower half of the paper which has been folded up and taped or stapled shut. Once the majority of students have responded to the question, we call on a student for the answer. From experience, we've found it best to call on a student with the correct answer. If no one in class has the correct answer, we simply move to the next step, which is to open the bottom half of the paper and discover the correct answer. We read the explanation as students follow along. A sample for "Everybody Hurts" is given below.

The best answer is d) always say you are sorry.

When Westerners tell you their sad news, they expect you to say, "I'm sorry," or "I'm sorry to hear that." This is the way other Westerners always answer. Westerners believe that trouble happens to everyone and that it is usually not our fault. We should feel sorry for other people because we all have the same problems. Also, most Westerners come from Christian families. Christians believe that people are all brothers before God and should all care about each other. Thus, it has become a fixed custom to say you are sorry even if you don't particularly like the other person or are not truly sorry.

If you hear another person's bad news and say nothing, you are quite impolite. Westerners think you only care about yourself. If you laugh when someone tells you bad news, you are a very rude person. It looks like you are enjoying the pain or sadness of another person. Many Easterners will get angry if you laugh in this situation. When speaking with Westerners, the Japanese would do well to show sincere sympathy

when confronted with a sad or troubling story. Americans will, consciously or unconsciously, expect that sort of reaction. Smiling or laughing will only add to their distress. (Rozman & Kato, 1998).

We have found it helpful to include documentation, particularly for statistics or conclusions that students may challenge. Such documentation gives me the opportunity to mention the titles of good textbooks on culture. We have also from time to time used such music culture assimilators as attention-getters in otherwise dry writing classes on documentation. When we find relevant news articles on our topics, we include copies at the ends of the assimilators for students' further reading outside of class.

We usually present these assimilators at the beginning of class. This rewards punctual students and provides enough time for tardy students to arrive before we begin the body of the lesson. Whenever possible, we choose a song reflecting the theme of the day's lesson. We used "Everybody Hurts" in a class on expressing sympathy in conversations.

Some teachers may contend that most popular music is transitory and lacks substance, but music is an expression of the deepest values of a culture. Good songs expressing substantive values endure, and in any given year, a number of these songs are produced. While we do not follow popular music as avidly as we did in our teens, we are able to collect good songs, which usually appear in the top ten, by taping the music specials of popular singers and the Grammy and Academy Award ceremonies, which highlight the best of popular music for the year. MTV's top twenty programs are also a good source.

Other songs which we have found productive for introducing western culture and American social trends are listed in the Appendix along with their class themes and quiz and questions. We are always on the lookout for new songs.

Statistical data in these assimilators must be updated periodically. Other, than that, once we have put together such an activity, we are able to use it for years with minimal preparation but very gratifying results. Music soothes the savage beast. There is something calming about starting a class with music and with an activity that students have specifically requested. On their midterm and end-of-term evaluations, students say these music segments were their favorite part of class, and they suggest that we use more of them. Even weakly motivated students have confessed to becoming somewhat interested in English through the music. Overall, we have found music culture assimilators to be an informative and consistently well-received class activity.

References

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About the Authors

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Appendix A

Song	Artist	Theme	Quiz Question
1. "I believe I Can Fly"	R. Kelly	Confidence building (first class)	In the late 1990's the U.S. government is trying a new way to help blacks and minorities: It is helping them by giving them more: (Circle the best answer). a) jobs b) education c) self-confidence d) money
2. "Anytime You Need a Friend"	Mariah Carey	Friendship	During their lifetime Americans will keep: a) small group of friends and those friends won't change. b) small groups of friends from elementary school, secondary school, university and their company. c) very few, long friendships but many short ones of one or two years.

Appendix A continued

Song	Artist	Theme	Quiz Question
3. "He Thinks He'll Keep Her"	Mary Chapin Carpenter	Family	Today Americans have a) the highest divorce rate in the world. b) the highest divorce rate in US history. c) about 4.3 divorces for every 1,000 people.
4. "Luka"	Suzanne Vega	The body	In America there are many children like Luka. They are badly abused and often even killed. Who abuses these children most often? a) their real mother or father. b) a foster parent or boyfriend of their mother. c) a total stranger.
5. "Drive My Car" (The video promotes use of a designated driver)	Beatles/ Recording Artists Against Drunk Drivers	Driving	Different states in America have different laws about driving, but what is the youngest age that a person can legally drive in America a) 12 b) 14 c) 16 d) 18
6. "I swear"	George Michael Montgomery	(Function) making promises	The number of unmarried teenage mothers is very high in America. Which statement is true today? a) More teenage girls get pregnant in America today than ever before. b) America, Canada and Australia have about the same percent of teenage mothers. c) In America over 2/3 of new teenage-mothers are not married.

Appendix A continued

Song	Artist	Theme	Quiz Question
7. "Sealed with a Kiss"	Jason Donovan	Summer vacation plans	Why are summer vacations from school an especially sad time for sweethearts in America? a) American summer vacations from school are long. b) American summer vacations are a time when most students travel for pleasure to far-off places.
8. "Champagne Super Nova"	Oasis	Drugs and teen problems	American newspapers reported that from 1998 to 1999 teenagers used ____ marijuana as compared with 1977. a) much more b) much less c) about the same amount of
9. "Star Spangled Banner" (The video was filmed at the Super Bowl during the Gulf War.)	Whitney Houston	Sports	In the videotape you see the crowd cheering and shouting with excitement. Why do you think they are doing this? a) Americans always act this way. They are very patriotic. b) Americans don't usually act this way, but they often do during time of war. c) Americans love the singer Whitney Houston. That is the only reason they are cheering.
10. "Runaway Train" (The video promotes awareness	Soul Asylum	Crime	This video estimates that 1 million children have gone missing in America. What is the biggest reason for this? a) They are stolen by one of their divorced parents.

Appendix A continued

Song	Artist	Theme	Quiz Question
			<p>b) They run away to escape abuse.</p> <p>c) They are stolen and often killed by strangers.</p>
11. "Another Day in Paradise" (The video promotes awareness of the problem of homelessness.)	Phil Collins	Your home or apartment	<p>In the song a man meets a homeless woman but won't help her. In fact, he pretends that he doesn't see her. Why do you think he acts this way?</p> <p>a) Americans feel no need to help strangers.</p> <p>b) Americans feel they should help the homeless, but there are too many poor people to help, so all they can do is ignore them.</p> <p>c) In America it is shameful to help poor and homeless people because they are dirty and lazy.</p>
12. "Streets of Philadelphia"	Bruce Springsteen	Health	<p>In America AIDS has increased greatly in the last ten years among:</p> <p>a) ordinary men and women.</p> <p>b) homosexuals</p> <p>c) drug users</p> <p>d) all groups</p>
13. "The War Song" (the video emphasizes the vulnerability of children during war.)	Boy George	War	<p>Who is hurt most by war?</p> <p>a) soldiers</p> <p>b) average men and woman</p> <p>c) children</p>

Appendix A continued

Song	Artist	Theme	Quiz Question
14. "Papa Don't Preach"	Madonna	(Function) giving advice	The number of teenage pregnancies in America _____ from 1991 to 1997. a) went up a little b) went down a lot c) remained the same
15. "Will You Marry me"	Paula Abdul	Dating or marriage	In America when a man and woman are ready for marriage: a) the man usually asks the woman to marry him. b) the woman usually asks the man to marry her. c) about half the time the man asks and half the time the woman asks. (A surprising number of students chose the wrong answer).