I'd like you to read two short poems by Roger McGough, one of the Liverpool Poets. Both could be considered culture bound, and therefore very difficult for L2 learners to understand. Or they could be considered culture rich, and therefore very useful for L2 learners to experience. Here's the first one.

**Vinegar**

sometimes
i feel like a priest
in a fish & chip queue
quietly thinking
as the vinegar runs through
how nice it would be
to buy supper for two

(McGough, 1983)

**Reflections on Reading “Vinegar”**

What mental processes did you use in experiencing the poem? What did you do in your mind? Think about it for a moment.

Did you see vinegar in your mind before you started to read? Was it in a bottle? Was it in your kitchen or in a restaurant? Mine was in a chip shop; but that's because I share a cultural background with Roger McGough.

Did you see the priest in the fish and chip queue? Did you feel the vinegar running through?

What can you remember about the poem now? Try seeing images of the poem in your mind and talking to yourself about what it means.

My memory is a very vivid combination of mental images. I can see a priest and the poet in a fish and chip shop on Scotland Road in Liverpool. It is cold outside but warm inside. I can smell the fat and feel the vinegar running through the newspaper which the priest’s fish and chips are wrapped in. I feel lonely in the way I sometimes did when I lived alone in Liverpool. This is a very personal response to the poem, what Rosenthal (1994) called an aesthetic response in which the reader lives in the text. Obviously, no L2 learner would have the same aesthetic response as me, but what I'm going to argue is that it’s possible to help learners to achieve aesthetic responses to texts set in cultures which are very different from their own.

My point is that when I read “Vinegar” I didn’t just understand the words, I experienced the poem. I did so both cognitively and affectively, linguistically and non-linguistically. I visualized, I talked to myself, I made connections, I felt feelings and sensations. I used the “language of the brain” (Bolstad, 1997:13). Of course, I was able to have a total experience of the poem because I’ve had an almost total experience of what it refers to. If you haven’t had directly relevant life experiences to connect the poem to, then you won’t have as total an experience of the poem as I did (especially if some of the words are unfamiliar, too). But what I'm going to argue is that helping learners to experience literature is far more profitable than getting them to study it. Experiencing literature multidimensionally can not only facilitate language acquisition (e.g., Mitchell & Myles, 1998) but it can help to develop cultural awareness too. The best way to develop understanding of another culture is not to observe it or study it, but to experience it. If that can’t be done directly, it can be done through experiencing it in literature and then reflecting on the norms of that culture and the equivalent norms in your own. It is, after all, when we travel that we most think about our own culture. We do so because we become aware of its differences from the culture we are traveling in. And of course we can travel through literature, too.

Here’s the second poem. It’s very short, but it’s culturally rich.

**Missed**

out of work
divorced
usually pissed
he aimed
low in life
and
missed.

(McGough, 1991)

How did you respond to the poem? Did you see someone in your mind? Was he someone you know? Did you feel anything for the man in the poem?

When I first read the poem I experienced what Masuhara Hitomi (this issue) calls multi-dimensional representation. That is, I did not just decode the poem linguistically, I represented it in my mind through a combination of sensory images, affective responses, and inner speech. I saw a man, who was similar to a friend of mine, queuing for his social security money, I felt both pity and anger, and I said to myself “Poor sod.”

Again, I was able to really engage with the poem because I have direct experience of the culture in which it’s based. A similar experience could be provided, though, through British literary works which highlight the effects of poor education and continued unemployment on confidence and morale. What I’m arguing is that, instead of explaining the cultural background to a text, we should provide more experience of similar issues and themes. When I taught a British Culture class at Kobe University, the students were initially confused and horrified to discover British economic and spiritual poverty; but, as they experienced more films and poems, they were moved to think more deeply about life in Britain and in Japan. . .

**Definitions**

By awareness I mean an open-minded, gradually developing, internal understanding, as distinct from knowledge, which is external and static (Tomlinson, 1994). By cultural awareness I mean awareness of how other groups of people think, feel, and behave.

By literature I mean spoken or written texts which achieve their effect implicitly, which leave gaps for the reader to fill in from their own experience, which get the reader to think and feel by interacting with the text, which both make use of and add to the receiver’s experience of life, which seek to achieve an aesthetic response in which the reader lives in the text. Such literature could be experienced in the form of novels, poems, short stories, articles, plays, films, advertisements, or even birthday cards. The important point is that in our first language we do not normally study literature, we experience it (Tomlinson, 1998b).
An Example of Combining Language, Literature, and Culture in the Mind

Procedure

By culture I mean the behavior and beliefs of a community of people. There is a universal culture which unites all human beings in shared emotions, feelings and instincts. This is an affective culture which is manifested in different ways in different parts of the world but to which we all belong. There are ethnic, racial, regional, and national cultures which share characteristics with other cultures but which are defined by their distinct behaviors (e.g., Japanese bowing vs. American handshakes). There are also cultures which reflect communities of shared interests and goals (e.g., there is a real-ale culture; a soccer 2 culture; a steam railway culture; all cultures to which I belong). And there is even the culture of oneself. Each of us is similar to other people because of our shared membership of community cultures. But each of us also differs from everybody else in what we think, feel, believe, and do. Of course, some of us diverge from the norm more than others do.

The more we understand and empathize with cultures to which we do not belong, the more positive and constructive we can be. In my view, this is the main objective of education, and one of the most effective ways of achieving it is through helping our learners to experience literature. In that way, they can come to understand other cultures and deepen their understanding of their own culture, too.

By combining in the mind, I mean that in responding to an experience we fire neural paths in the brain which connect what we are experiencing now to what we have experienced before and what we expect to experience in the future (Masuhara, this issue; Tomlinson, 1998a, 2000a, 2000b). These neural paths are both cognitive and affective, linguistic and nonlinguistic, sensory and reflective. The more connections we achieve, the more we are likely to understand the experience and the more likely we are to retain and gain from the experience, too.

You might like to go back and see what connections you make when reading "Vinegar" and "Missed" again.

In order to illustrate the principles and procedures of my approach to combining language, literature, and culture in the mind (see also Tomlinson, 1999), I would like to give in lesson plan form an example of a lesson I've taught with foreign language students.

**Level**
Elementary and above

**Time**
40-45 minutes

**Aims**
To stimulate emotive responses to a poem in the L2 and to help learners to express and develop their responses.

To promote the use of visualization and inner speech when using the L2.

To develop awareness of the issues of old age and loneliness in Britain and in Japan.

1. Tell the learners to think of an old woman that they know. Tell them to try to see pictures in their minds of their old lady, to see where she is, to see what she is doing, to see what she is wearing. Tell them to talk to themselves about their feelings towards the old woman.

2. Tell the learners to form pairs and to tell each other about their old woman. Tell them to describe the pictures of their old woman in their mind and to express their feelings towards her.

3. Tell the learners you are going to read them a poem about an old woman and that, as they listen, they should try to see pictures of her in their minds and to talk to themselves about their feelings towards her.

4. Read the poem below to the learners:

   I'm an old, old lady
   And I don't have long to live.
   I am only strong enough to take
   Not to give. No time left to give.
   I want to drink, I want to eat,
   I want my shoes taken off my feet.
   I want to talk but not to walk
   Because if I walk, I have to know
   Where it is I want to go.
   I want to sleep but not to dream.
   I want to play and win every game
   To live with love but not to love
   The world to move but me not move
   I want I want for ever and ever
   The world to work, the world to be clever.
   Leave me be, but don't leave me alone.
   That's what I want. I'm a big round stone
   Sitting in the middle of a thunderstorm.
   There you are: that's true.
   That's me. Now: you.

   (Arden & D'Arcy, 1962)

5. Tell the learners to think back over the poem, to see pictures in their minds of the old lady, to decide what they think about her.

6. Tell the learners to get into groups and to discuss their responses to the following statement about the old lady in the poem: "I don't like this lady. She's very selfish."

7. Give the learners the poem and three pictures of old ladies and tell them in their groups to decide which of the old ladies wrote the poem. (NB: Ideally, one of the old ladies is smiling, one is holding her head in her hands, and the other is looking sadly out of a window.)

8. Get each group to join with another group and then to discuss their answers to 6 and 7 above.

9. Whilst the groups are discussing their answers, put up the following instructions on cards on the classroom walls. Each instruction should be on a different card and the cards should be spaced out around the room. "Learn to recite the poem using a voice which you think sounds like the old lady." "Paint a picture of the how you see the poem." You are the old lady. Write a letter to your son in Australia." "You are the old lady. Write your diary for today." The old lady goes to the park and meets an old man on a park bench. Write the dialogue between them."

10. "You are the old lady..."
The language-culture link is significant in FL education because culture plays a role in helping FL learners to be proficient in the target language (Nault, 2006), as Alptekin (2002, p.58) puts it, "learning a foreign language becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language and its speakers." From learning a new language, FL learners experience a new world. Traditional thoughts of FC teaching tend to limit on transmission of foreign cultural information or teaching foreign literature (Rosenblatt, 1994). It can also be followed for lessons based on factual texts, which can be used to stimulate emotive reactions to events, places, processes, or issues and to get students to compare another culture with their own. Such activities could be used to replace or supplement language decoding activities which are based on a potentially engaging text in the source book.

Conclusion

I'd like to urge all educators to include cultural awareness in their curricula and all teachers and materials developers to use an experiential approach in their development of cultural awareness activities. In that way, we can help learners to broaden and develop their minds and to achieve language proficiency too.

References


