

## **Culture-focused learning in the EFL classroom: Materials and approaches**

**Janet M.D. Higgins**  
Okinawa University, Japan  
jmdth@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** In this presentation, I introduce approaches and materials that I have developed with university students studying English as a foreign language in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan, to focus on cultural diversity and regional identity.

Okinawa is the southernmost Prefecture in Japan. It has a rich cultural tradition that was at its height in the 'Golden Age' of the 15th century. One of my teaching goals is to help students identify the special features of this living heritage and to be able to talk about and explain them to visitors in English. Since we clearly learn about our own culture through contrasting it with others, my materials are also multicultural. Several sets of materials are introduced:

Using the vehicle of The Guided Walk to identify, research, and make presentations about local cultural artifacts. This includes students assuming the role of tour guide.

Looking at what artifacts we can find on the streets in cities outside Japan.

Examples from a government funded CALL project in which our team is compiling regional-focused lexical materials in a visual dictionary.

**Key words:** culture-focused learning materials, Okinawa, visual multilingual dictionary

### **1. Background**

In this presentation, I introduce approaches and materials that I have developed with university students studying English as a foreign language in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan, to focus on cultural diversity and regional identity.

Okinawa is the southernmost prefecture in Japan. It has a rich cultural tradition that was at its height in the 'Golden Age' of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was incorporated into Japan from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although sharing many aspects of mainstream Japanese culture, it still retains many treasures from its earlier identity. It also has a local language/dialect, but this is disappearing. One of my teaching goals is to help students identify the special features of this living heritage and to be able to talk about and explain them to visitors in English, or to introduce them to people they meet when travelling abroad.

The language level of course participants is mixed. They range from 2 - 4<sup>th</sup> year students with a variety of language experience. Some have spent one year studying abroad in an English speaking country, some are overseas students, and some have limited knowledge.

The activities and materials I have chosen to introduce are two closely related practical projects which involve fieldwork and student presentations, and a multilingual, multimodal CALL dictionary project being developed at Okinawa University by our 3-person team and funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education. For the first two, I will explain the activities, and give examples of students' work. For the third, I will give several examples of the materials.

### **2. Activities**

Of the two activities I will introduce, the second, The Guided Walk, is the most complex and was developed first. The first, Street Life, was the result of my interest in photography and travel, and specifically developed as a result of a conference trip I made in 2010. I wanted to share my impressions of the city of Granada in Spain with my students, and searched for a vehicle that would also be a teaching and learning opportunity. I subsequently found that what I had developed complemented The Guided Walk in a very useful way.

#### **2.1 Street life**

Born then out of working with the photos I brought back from Granada, the Street Life activity can be conceptualized as a simple but effective way of reflecting on what cultural artifacts are, and recognizing the distinctiveness of one's own cultural artifacts through comparisons with those of other cultures.

We grow up seeing the world around us as the way the world 'is'. Exposure through media to other cultures does not necessarily change our view that 'our cultural world' is 'the norm', and that the others are 'strange', or at least not the norm. We take for granted the cultural artifacts we live among and with which we operate. By artifacts, I refer to objects, living and non-living, with which we cohabit, as well as ways of acting. It can often be difficult to recognize what these artifacts are because we are so familiar with them. It may also be

the case that interpretations of them are imposed on us by authority figures, political and social institutions, and so forth.

One way of stepping back and discerning the artifacts with which we are so familiar and which create our cultural world, is to look at those of other cultures. I chose Granada because of its place in the history of Christian and Muslim interactions in Spain. My students have little familiarity with European life and institutions and even less with those of the Muslim world. I chose photos of things that were unfamiliar and things that were familiar but different. While focusing on artifacts and what we can find in the streets, we might think that we are dealing with superficialities. However, what may appear superficial may have a much deeper significance, and it such a level that I hope to reach.

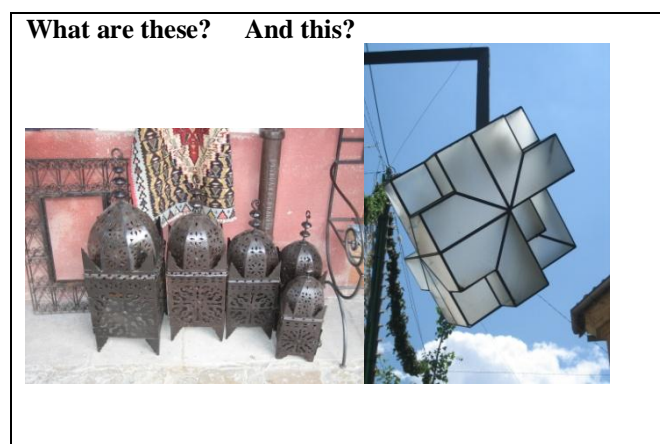
Let me introduce examples from the PowerPoint presentation I created for this activity. It begins with photos of the narrow streets of the old Moorish town and the wide streets of the new European town developed by the Christian monarchs. We then look at what we can find on the streets, (Figures 1 and 2), and students try to work out what each photo shows.

Figure 1



Students recognized the function of the doorknocker in Figure 1, but several of them found the hand eerie and they were very uncomfortable with the idea of using it.

Figure 2




I was particularly interested in the right hand photo of the street light in Figure 2. Its shape reflects the mocarabes decorating the niches and arches of many of the rooms in the Alhambra. But what do mocarabes represent? We talked about this in class.

The next stage of the activity is for the students to choose one of the photos, explain the artifact, and find an Okinawan equivalent or related example. Figure 3 shows the work of one student. He explained the significance of the design of the light, found an interesting street light in Okinawa and told us the significance of the design. Although we needed to expand this further by explaining why this traditional hat is shaped in this way and with these specific colours, this piece of work shows the type of thought, research, and skills that I am hoping to encourage and foster.

Figure 3

**Street Light by E-san**



The street light in Granada has an interesting shape. It has a long story. Mohammed, who wrote down in the Koran the message he received from God, hid in a cave to escape his enemies. When he was hiding, a spider's web covered the entrance to the cave and saved him. That street light's motif is taken from the stalactite shapes in the interior of the cave.

I found interesting street lights in Shin-toshin in Naha. The shape is the **Hana-gasa** which is Okinawa's traditional hat.

In describing the objects in the photos, students have to grapple with the language used for describing physical attributes, functions, and significance. This is good training for The Guided Walk activity.

## **2.2 The Guided Walk**

The Guided Walk is a well respected and popular leisure activity. It is not only attractive to tourists, but is a regular event in many local communities. My version of the Walk consists of a progression of tasks which focus on the language used to lead a Guided Walk, and involves learning and practising how to describe and explain cultural artifacts.

### **2.2.1 Descriptive Language**

Since the language level of the course participants is often low, I provide content prompts, example expressions, and model descriptions for items such as buildings, local flora, local food, local restaurants, a local activity or job. We intersperse work on descriptive language with the other activities.

Figure 4 An example of content prompts

**Describing a building**

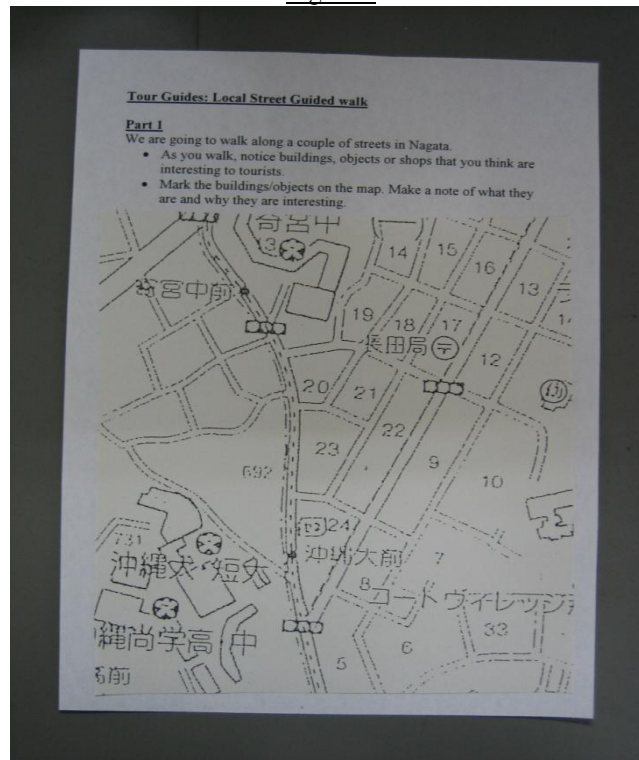
- its name in Japanese and /or Uchinaguchi; the meaning/translation of this in English
- its purpose
- its age
- what it is built of
- other

\* Uchinaguchi is local Okinawan dialect

### **2.2.2 Fieldwork 1**

Figure 5 is an excerpt from one the worksheets we use. The map delimits the area we investigate. In this case it is a small community close to the university. The students are divided into groups and asked to walk around the area searching out things that they feel are typical of Okinawa or the area, or that they think visitors will be interested in. They are asked to take photos of them, both close up and in their natural surroundings.

Figure 5



### **2.2.3 Post-field work 1**

Each group works on descriptions of their artifacts and designs a Guided Walk round the area.

### **2.2.4 Guiding language**

We study expressions we can use for different stages of the Guided Walk. These include: explaining our tour goal, beginning the tour and getting visitors attention; pointing out features as we walk; asking questions of the group; answering questions of the group; ending the tour.

### **2.2.5 Field work 2**

The members of each group take turns using the guiding language and escorting us round the area. Other group members are encouraged to answer questions. Figure 6 provides some examples of what the students said on one Walk.

Figure 6 Scripts of the guides in action (revised)

1. This is an old house in the Okinawan style. If you look at the roof, you will see two things like lions. They are called "shisa" in the Okinawan local language. If you look carefully at the "shisa" you will find they are different. The mouth is open for the male on the left, and the mouth is closed for the female on the right.

Q: Does anyone know why they are different?

A: The mouth of the male is open so that he can make evil spirits leave. The mouth of the female is closed so that she can keep the good things of the family.

[X-san]

2. If you look on the right, you'll see an old Okinawa style roof. It is called "Akagawara" which means "red roof".

Next, on the left, you'll see a big tree. It's a "Gajimaru" or banyan. It is a very famous tree in Okinawa because a fairy called "Kjimunaa" lives in this tree according to Okinawan legend.

[K-san]

3. Ladies and Gentleman, please look over here. This is “utaki” in the local Okinawan language. People believe that the god of the area lives here. They come here to pray for their safety.

[S-san]

### **2.2.6 Presentations**

Each group works together to create a PowerPoint presentation of their Guided Walk. It contains the photos they took during fieldwork and their descriptions. This activity simulates the actual Walks. Sometimes the weather or time does not permit us to complete field work 2. As they show their PowerPoints, group members point the route out on the area map and use guiding language. Figure 7 shows students working together on their presentations, and Figure 8 shows a moment during a presentation.

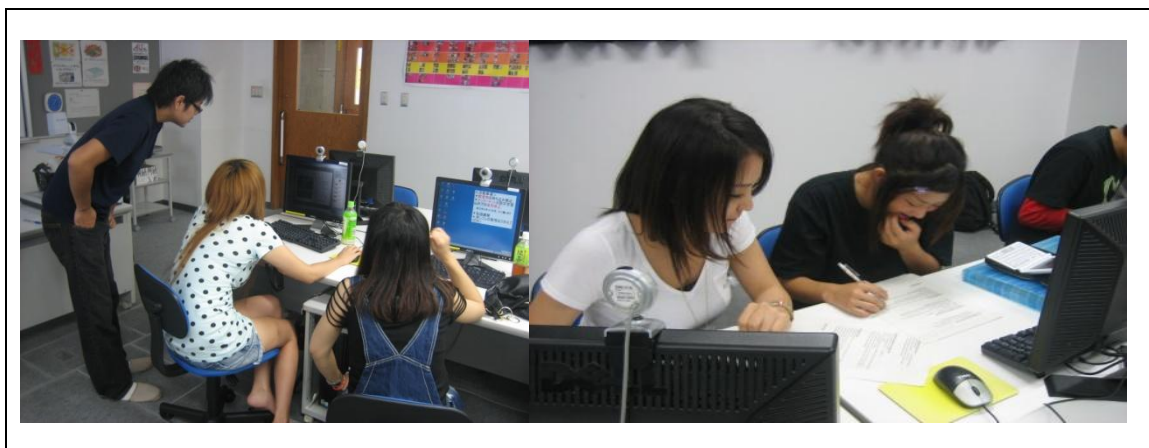


Figure 7



Figure 8

### 3. A multilingual, multimodal culture-focused dictionary project

For the last 5 years, two colleagues and I have been working on a Japanese Ministry of Education funded project to create multilingual and multicultural lexical resources for our students. The need was felt by the English, Chinese and Japanese language teachers at the university for lexical materials that would focus on Okinawan cultural artifacts. Our textbooks and dictionaries are sadly lacking in such materials. For instance, the English language textbooks and dictionaries available are British and American English based. They do not provide help to students who want to talk about and explain their Okinawan life experiences. Our goal was to create a series of units in which we could introduce locally appropriate lexical items.

Each item is presented in English, Chinese and Japanese, in written and spoken form, and is illustrated by a photograph or short video. We have tried to use videos for actions (verbs) and photos for objects (nouns). Figure 9 is of a screen showing a dictionary entry. On the right are the languages in which students can choose to see or listen to the item. On the left is the menu for the unit. They can click to move between subsections

Figure 9



In addition to an item itself, we have created a number of short example sentences that show the use of the item in a natural content. This allows us, for example in English, to show a noun being used in the indefinite, definite or plural forms, with the appropriate articles. Verbs are used in various tenses and forms. We also have a cultural note section for many items in which we explain cultural points that are specific to the different language users. These sections are therefore different for the three language versions.

The organization of the units varies according to the topic. Our units on Arriving at and Departing from Naha Airport, contain both object focused sections (souvenirs, airport amenities) and process focused sections (checking in, going through immigration). Learning activities include recognizing and using the items in short conversations, and using the items in sequences. Figure 9 shows a dictation exercise.

Figure 10



Our unit on the Tsuboya Pottery district of Naha is more complex. The items are first introduced in related topic sets and collected in photo galleries. They are then used in various activities. One for example is learning about the pottery making process. Another is interviewing a local potter and a local architect. Another is acting as a tour guide to the district. We intend the materials to be used for self-study and in the classroom. We would like the items to be used in extended conversations, in the preparation of speeches, interviews, and guided tours. More details about this project can be found in my poster presentation at this conference.

#### **4. Final comments**

The three sets of materials I have introduced in this presentation are all aimed at encouraging and enabling students to observe, explain, share, and value their local culture and identities as they challenge themselves to communicate in English. In their various ways, the materials and the methodology are designed to stimulate students by providing interesting authentic and semi-authentic learning opportunities.

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#### **6. Acknowledgements**

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