

Creative approaches to education in the Japanese tertiary sector : two case studies using Applied Visual Enquiry (AVE)

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Abstract

This research looks at two distinctly different approaches to the use of visual methods within the Japanese tertiary classroom. Both approaches use the theory of Applied Visual Enquiry (AVE), a sub-strand of Arts-based Research which takes as its premise, a position that Content-based Instruction (CBI) can more fully take place in the Japanese tertiary sector if accompanied by visual materials or methods. These visual materials can either be generated by the educand as mark-making, model-making or bricolage, or supplied by the facilitator. Regardless, they act as a conduit through which information is both discussed, understood, and deconstructed.

Keywords:

Applied Visual Enquiry; Japanese Higher Education; Tertiary Education; Content-based Instruction

Introduction

As has been previously postulated elsewhere (Woollock, 2008), there is significant observational and cultural data to strongly suggest that any literate Japanese student, who can read or interpret the 50,000¹ characters of the Sino-Japanese writing system, *kan-ji*, has enormous latent potentiality in the area of visual literacy. This hypothesis is based upon the fact that a *kan-ji* character, whether it be classified as either a pictogram, grapheme, or idiogram, is a unique piece of visual encoding which carries a variety of information such as the elemental component parts, radical, and structure. Regardless of which descriptor is used, the fact remains that the reader of *kan-ji* visually interprets the character's strokes to infer meaning in both a literal and textural manner. In some cases this interpretation provides information even when the actual character or reading is unknown. Thus, it is posited that the *kan-ji* reader has, over millennia, developed not only their motor cortex (for writing the character), but also their visual cortex too. In addition, the cerebrum which controls sensory perception and motor skills should be developed. Both the temporal lobe which not only processes language learning, but also visual memory, and the occipital lobe too, which is the brain's visual processing centre should be highly developed in the *kan-ji* reader. The practical sum of this neurology, is the hypothesis that *kan-ji* readers are potentially adept at utilizing with visual methods in language learning. Assuming this to be a reasonable hypothesis, if the classroom practitioner working in the Japanese tertiary English language sector wishes to utilise appropriate teaching methodologies and theoretical frames to maximize Japanese students' learning potential, then it makes sense to then try to incorporate

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visuality and visual methods in the arenas of Teaching English as a Foreign language (TEFL), English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), or Content-based Instruction (CBI).

Born from that starting point this research describes two quite different approaches to incorporating visuality, found materials, and artefacts in the tertiary classroom. In the initial study, Crosby, working in the area of visual literacy and visual stimuli uses visually encoded narratives in the form of comic books to introduce students to tropes present in American culture; which he then deconstructs to reflect back upon and highlight certain cultural manifestations within Japanese culture. He explores the possibility of visual artefacts to stimulate engagement, discourse, and dialogue. Contrasting and complementing this is a study performed by Woollock who, although also using visuality to stimulate discourse, engaged students with model-making and visual rendering in an attempt to enable lower-intermediate non-English language majors to effectively deal with more complex content-based learning, in this instance, environmental issues.

Context

Visual methods, whether they be classified as Arts-based Research (ABR) (Finley, 2008; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Bagueley and Castro-Salazar, 2012; Leavy, 2015) or Arts-based Educational Research (ABER) (Barone, 1995; Barone and Eisner, 1997; Barone, 2006; Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2017), have a long and complex history within mainstream education and little or no presence within mainstream tertiary education. Art, which is so often seen as a middle-class pursuit (Stephens, 2015; Finkelppearl in Pasternak, 2007; McAdam, 2014; Gosden, 2015) can also be viewed as something either for children, or somehow neither *robust* nor *serious*; perhaps even inappropriate for the tertiary level. This opinion seems especially true as the global academy shifts closer to quantitative methods and robust metrics which rely less on formative and more on summative outcomes because less qualitative approaches cannot be easily ranked and compared; standardized in global league tables and rankings. In addition to these factors, there exists difficulties with facilitators who thus may not be proficient creative practitioners and thus employ spurious or quasi-visual methods in ways which are neither 'artistic' nor necessarily creative (see the writings of Grant Kester and Clair Bishop for a sustained discourse on this). Art or visual methods, it can often seen, are used as films were for so long in the EFL classroom, as more of a distraction than a genuine pedagogical resource, which of course they can be. Coupled to these genuine concerns, is the possible resistance from student learners who may either repeat the prejudices noted above, feeling that visual methods are inappropriate in the tertiary classroom, or offer resistance because they lack confidence in Art², or the perception of what they think is Art. In overcoming this last problem, we might therefore, need to draw on Wright's (2005) concept of 'stealth art' which consists of 'art-related' not 'art-specific' practices, something which as Petrescu (2007, p. 48) notes 'operate in contexts often far removed from art-specific spaces [...] beyond the scope of work operating under the banner of art.' We may also need to consider Lakoff (2004, 2007), and Goffman's work (1974) on framing i.e. how the use of visuality is conveyed and framed to learners in a way which generates with least resistance.

2 As has been stated, Art is not the most appropriate term as the use of visuals encompasses many creative domains and when employed as Art per se, is better seen as 'mark-making.'

Case study #1: Crosby

Rationale

The approach described below was undertaken with 4th year students who registered for an English seminar class (*zemi*) described as examining American culture, society, and language through the use of comic books. It was clearly articulated that whilst the class employed visual methods, the focus of the *zemi* was to critically engage with and deconstruct American culture through English. The comics used varied in level (introductory/mid-level/high-level) and this flexibility allowed students to select the most appropriate entry point into the various topics and themes to be discussed in class. The main purpose of undertaking lessons with these materials was to give students immediate context with which to compare, contrast and evaluate cultural manifestations in an inter-cultural context (Japan and America).

Aside from the comparison, contrast, and evaluation of various cultural tropes, the lessons described herein aimed to provide the facilitator with a better understanding of the theories of learning, as part of their on-going research. The theories which were explored in this case were the cognitive theory by Jean Piaget (1936) and conditioning theory by Ivan Pavlov (1941). Piaget's theory of cognitive development has three components: *schemas*, *adaptation processes*, and *stages of cognitive development* (McLeod, 2018). The schemas are defined as the building blocks of knowledge; the adaptation process is built from various stages like equilibrium, assimilation, and accommodation; the stages of cognitive development are *sensorimotor*, *preoperational*, *concrete operational*, and *formal operational* (McLeod, 2018). Simply put, this theory emphasizes that the development of an individual is based on *intelligence*. Pavlov's classical conditioning, on the other hand, explores the behavior of an individual based on the *conditioning* process which includes social interaction and exposure to the natural environment (McLeod, 2014). According to these theories, there must be a tool which will help facilitators or adults to condition the mind of the learners to completely understand a phenomenon, concept, or thought. The use of comic books as pedagogical artefacts can play a vital role in understanding these theories, acting as visually encoded tools useful for obtaining knowledge and information or stimulating deconstruction which has to be interrogated rather than simply consumed. Through the defined realia, this study aimed to begin the process of better understanding the pedagogical implications of using comic books as visual tools for learning within the theory of AVE.

The approaches used in this class were chosen over others because comic books, being the epitome of popular culture, encapsulate and crystallize social trends du jour in a print format (Shariyalyani et al., 2015; da Silva, dos Santos, and de Araújo Bispo, 2017). Furthermore, when expressed via visual media, comics offer a quick and generally broad overview of social and cultural expressions, acting as a kind of 'cultural barometer;' useful for understanding dominant cultural signifiers, memes, and tropes pervasive at that time. In addition, because they are snapshots in time, they can be compared and contrasted with previous material of the same type. And, in the case of the U.S., for example, as pioneers of the comic book, there are many decades of material available for analysis. Furthermore, as Japan has equivalent materials too spanning the same historical period, cross-cultural comparisons for the same time frame was possible (Armour,

2011). In addition to this, being able to quickly identify dominant themes and narratives which remained unchanged over time and those which were more fluid in their expression (universality or social acceptance of cultural norms) can provide a useful measure of social trends. Using realia or comic books in this way as pedagogical artefacts can provide a significant impact in the understanding of social and cultural structures in a given country. This was especially true in this instance as the comics used were aimed at both the both domestic and overseas markets. This providing a useful leaping off point for examining how a nation portrays itself; both internally and externally. This and other points facilitated their use for comparison and contrast (Unser-Schutz, 2011).

Methods

The methods which were employed consisted of: comic book reading, analysis, thematic depiction, and deconstruction. Employing these methods, students were asked to read and analyze the structures, language, and ideas contained within a range of comic books they had been given. This engagement related to two phenomenon, firstly in relation to their own culture and secondly, their understanding of American culture. Students were provided with English comic books to analyze the language, themes, and visual tropes of not only the 'other culture (America) but also to be used as a mirror to reflect back on and illuminate aspects of their own culture. The comic books provided were from Marvel and largely focused on stories about mutant characters. These comics were used to give learners visual representations or snapshots of culture, to allow them to compare and contrast between societies.

This process enabled them to understand the similarities and differences between these two cultures. With regard to generating linguistic competence, as the comics were written in English, the students were asked to look beyond the surface reading of the illustrations and to also engage with the content of the dialogues. The goal of this approach was to deepen their understanding of American culture through English and provide some contemporary vocabulary, something which is often missing from mainstream or conservative textbooks.



Figure 1: Some of the materials used in class

Observations, Outcomes, and Findings

As a result of the approach, students learned a variety of cultural information about Americans and America based on the portrayals of characters in the comic books. Since the students were not fluent in English, one significant finding was the difficulty learners had in understanding non-standard English language and their lack of cultural awareness; many experienced difficulty in comprehending some of the less mainstream vocabulary and information presented in the

artefacts. However, as per the theory of AVE, which postulates that piggy-backing learning onto a visual platform, to in effect use visual methods as a conduit to achieve primary learning objectives, the visuals played a significant role in helping to facilitate understanding of the whole dialogue. In addition, through the facial appearances or expressions of the characters, students began to comprehend if the dialogues were positive or negative and learned about non-verbal communication (NVC). To assist with language learning, students also made their own vocabulary lists, and again, this task highlighted an interesting phenomenon that students had difficulty understanding slang words used in the texts. Furthermore, a great number of students expressed that they were disturbed by the portrayals of characters in the stories that illustrated American culture. These included: the 'perfect' figure and physical appearances of the male and female characters, the representation of mutants as a minority, and the portrayal of the Japanese characters who were seen as extremely traditional and far from the modern views of the Japanese. This last factor elucidated American's often stereotypical or satirized view of foreign or *other* cultures. Interestingly, the visual rendering of *other* in American comics also initiated discourse on how non-Japanese nationals are represented in Japanese media and society. Such as the clipping below from a Kumon leaflet which depicts non-Japanese in a stereotypical manner.



Figure 2: Kumon advertising depicting non-Japanese with elongated noses. ©Kumon.

It is arguable that the soft qualitative data which emerged and which was recorded in field-notes suggested that the approach outlined above were effective at meeting the aims and objectives of the class outlined in the curriculum and syllabus. This was also in part attributable to the absence of summative testing, which allowed students to freely focus wholly on reading and analyzing the artefacts, rather than being preoccupied with what was likely to be 'tested.' The motivation here was that students should learn to engage with the materials for the sake of learning, discovery, and enjoyment rather than focusing on short-term memory and test-taking skills. Although the gathering of quantitative data was not within the scope of this enquiry, through longitudinal observations it is fair to conclude that the approaches used in this class aided learning, understanding, and engagement of the students with the class objectives and further provided an agentic platform for learners to develop an interest in reading and exploring comic books in an intrinsic manner (Unser-Schutz, 2011) befitting of students at the tertiary level. Amongst the qualitative data which was captured, one noteworthy factor emerged, which suggested that there was a significant dissonance in character portrayals between the Japanese and Americans and that whilst certain taboo subjects exist in both cultures, there was a sense that the Japanese comics often employed a certain *tate-mae* (建前) in how they chose to represent certain negative phenomenon. For example in Japanese comics, unlike their American

counterparts, substance abuse is not portrayed. As a result of this and other such apparently small observations the significant role comic books can play as pedagogical artefacts, particularly in stimulating dialogue and discussion for communicative purposes was illustrated to the author.

Conclusions and Further investigations

This study concluded that the approaches used can provide a significant contribution to teaching cultural ideas and contexts; that the chosen pedagogical artefacts can also help educators utilize the theory of cognitive development and conditioning theory to understand the learning process of their students (Xiangui, 2005) was also noted. However, there were three clear limitations identified in the selected approach. Firstly, the lack of time to further utilize the pedagogical artefacts to learn more about American cultures and its similarities and differences with Japanese culture. Secondly, the lack of pedagogical artefacts used in Japanese led to the focus on the American comic books rather than a balanced exploration of two different types of artefacts. Finally, the lack of resources; although the approaches used English artefacts, it would be better if a variety of comic books (in addition to Marvel) were used to expand the process of exploration of American culture. This could widen and strengthen the perspectives, thoughts, and comprehension of the students. Furthermore, to improve their research, it would be better to have more time and resources to facilitate learning, engagement, and understanding of the topics. The use of realia as pedagogical artefacts did show promising results, which can be consolidated by future research. The above limitations identified, however, did not hinder this enquiry to provide interesting and informative data that can offer a significant contribution to pedagogy and learning. Despite these limitations, the research presented a significant understanding of the view of the learners in exploring and analyzing artefacts.



Figure 3: In class discussion

Case study #2: Woollock

Rationale

This enquiry was carried out with a first-year class in the Faculty of Social Sciences at a private university in Kyoto, Japan. The class was a one semester class taught twice a week for a total of 180 minutes. Within the university where this research was conducted, this particular faculty had a reputation as *the faculty of last resort*, attracting students who failed to enter other higher level facilities or those who excelled at sports and had entered University to bolster the sports teams. The classes were large (roughly 35 students) and the student body consisted of non-English language majors who all took this class as a compulsory English-language requirement; the rest of their classes being taught in Japanese. As a result the plethora of learning styles, learning

attitudes and student characters was markedly different from the three other universities the author also taught at during this time. That stated, however, although the students scored low on metrics like TOEFL and TOEIC, they had invariably all attended well-respected high schools and through both their primary and secondary schooling had generally been taught consistently. Hence, behind certain initial behavioral or attitudinal problems students were intelligent and well-equipped (scholastically) to deal with new or innovative approaches to learning. The development and use of bespoke materials and a self-produced textbook was also inspired by the very free and open approaches to learning and teaching encouraged by the University. In order to facilitate high-level content-based discourse on environmental issues, to challenge static or more 'traditional' models, (which the author felt would not fit with this cohort), and also to create a fracture between secondary level pedagogy, and tertiary level andragogy, the author developed the methodology described herein. This mixed methods, arts-based Educational Research (ABER) approach to the delivery of content-based instruction (CBI), or English as a Means of Instruction (EMI) was elected for three reasons. Firstly, and as noted in the introduction, it was a strand of research derived from Japanese culture which the author had been working with for some time. Secondly, the author's own theory of Applied Visual Enquiry (AVE) was chosen as a vehicle through which content could be facilitated, as the author postulates that quite complex learning could take place if it were piggybacked onto something more simple. In this way art, or visual methods within AVE act as a kind of Trojan Horse, and are not the end requirement per se, being subservient to the content being engaged with. Finally, this action-research attempted to shake up and explore the methodologies used in Japanese tertiary education, which at present can often appear less than dynamic, and less than appropriate given the obvious distinction between secondary and tertiary education coupled with the need to shift the learning methodologies in accordance with this sector and the current epoch. Furthermore, given that the facilitator is a non-Japanese national it was considered appropriate to draw upon progressive models used in their own country which acknowledges both their own cultural heritage and positionality i.e. the facilitator saw no reason to adopt methods *de rigueur* in Japan when they seemed inappropriate and conventional, simply for the act of maintaining the status quo. Visual arts have always enjoyed a position as a point of departure for disrupting the pre-established meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984) and this action-research continues that lineage.



Figure 4: An example of student's work (solar phone charger)

Methods

The methods employed in this action research were very simple and repetitive. Such an approach was elected because the author wanted to make the facilitation as unobtrusive as possible and

utilize Atkinson and Shiffrin's 'Multiple store model of memory' (1968) which posits that by repetition, information can be transferred from the Short-term Memory (STM), to the Long-term Memory (LTM), and that both procedural and episodic memory will aid retention. Furthermore, given that the AVE methods used may appear somewhat unorthodox, the author chose to minimize any interference from complex models of facilitation. To begin with, students were given a copy of the author's textbook; this textbook was distributed to students in a loose-leaf format and then placed in a sturdy A4-size ring binder with detachable clear pockets, which students purchased in lieu of a published textbook. The distributed print 'textbook' consisted of art-based projects, either model-making or drawing/collage, with the pages organized as such that the font space was left open for drawing/collage and the grided back page was open for writing. On the back page the writing space was further separated into two parts, the upper part for writing sentences whilst the lower portion was used for listing new vocabulary associated with each particular project.

The actual approach to facilitation consisted of a four distinct phases. Firstly, students conducted research as homework, this research was then brought to class where, as a warm up they shared and discussed it with their peers. This was followed by a period of brainstorming and rough sketching or model-making, which again was then shared and discussed with their classmates in both an attempt to help the student understand their choices and take questions/critique from their peers. Once this stage was complete students then continued to draw, sketch and model-make for a concentrated period after which they spent some time in small groups or pairs explaining their ideas and taking questions. After class, the project was then finished for homework along with additional research for the next project, and so this cycle was continued throughout the 15-week semester.



Figure 5: Using models to generate discussion

Observations, Outcomes, and Findings

From this class there were four clear qualitative outcomes or findings; quality of academic work, studentship, group cohesion, and transferable skills. For all of these factors, no quantitative data was gathered as this was not within the scope of this enquiry. Therefore, it is not possible to establish whether or not students actual levels of comprehension, cognitive faculty or linguistic competence improved as this would have involved running the same class with a parallel group, which was not possible. That established, however, given the qualitative nature of the enquiry, the first and most important factor to arise from this approach was the strength of the pedagogical output. Whether preparatory research, vocabulary building or academic writing and articulation of ideas, the level and quality of the output was outstanding. Given the short intensity of the

twice-weekly, one semester class, the steep learning curve seemed to have yielded quite tangible advancements which were clearly evident in the learning portfolios which can be seen here along with photos of their group exhibition which took place in the foyer of the Faculty building:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/artsbasedresearch/albums/72157648945059274>



In addition to the above, examples of student's model making can be seen here:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/artsbasedresearch/albums/72157650815363487>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/artsbasedresearch/albums/72157648945350224>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/artsbasedresearch/albums/72157651267869031>



As noted earlier, the theory of AVE uses the potentiality of visual methods as a conduit for learning a secondary subject. Although it employs visual methods, it is not about 'art,' rather it is about using creative and critical visual methods to engage and stimulate learning, aid retention and articulation, and circumvent resistance to learning. In this instance it was used to help students understanding of not only environmental issues, but also to provide them with a grounding in the general principles of academic writing, research and creativity which are expected in the tertiary sector.

Because the format for this class was based upon a repeating pattern of homework, classwork, pair work and revision, students spent approximately two-thirds of any given class (nearly 1 hour) in peer discussion. The net result of this substantial discussion time coupled with the fact that students presented their own original ideas (Japanese: *hon-ne* 本音) and not a desired or contrived response (Japanese: *tate-mae* 建前) or one based upon a simple cloze exercise in a prescribed textbook, meant that students actually got to know each other, and made very deep connections with their peers. At the end of term, the key feature of all the class surveys from those lessons



Figure 6: Using models in class to generate discourse

which utilized this postmodern epistemology based largely on student-centric learning and research, was how much the students liked each other (as a result of the class), and how convivial the atmosphere was.

Conclusions and Further investigation

The methodologies I have employed in Japan have always sought to be both *grounded* (Strauss and Glaser, 1967) and student-centric (Knowles, 1973). As a facilitator I align with pedagogues Freire, Knowles and Dewey, and where possible try to use progressive methods aimed at both disrupting the static norms and attempting to raise the critical consciousness of students (Freire called this *conscientização*) so as to help encourage them to become intrinsically motivated learners capable of engaging with higher order skills and moving language beyond something seen simply for passing a test. Having used a variety of pedagogical and andragogical approaches over a lengthy period employed in the Japanese tertiary sector, this class stays with me as my most memorable teaching experience from my initial period in Japan as it was embraced by students with enthusiasm, passion, and a spirit of discovery and openness.

As stated in the paragraph above, despite the fact that this was a qualitative study, if this were to be run again it would perhaps be prudent to run two or more parallel classes with similarly streamed students - perhaps at different universities (to avoid collusion), some of which would employ all AVE and some of which would not. I would also continue to ensure that students understood the methods being used and to articulate why they were chosen and further outline the differences in both methods and expectations at the secondary and tertiary levels, something which can often get misplaced.

Conclusion

This research paper set out to provide documentation of two different, yet complimentary approaches to using AVE within the Japanese tertiary sector. Firstly Crosby outlined a unique and progressive approach to incorporating comics as visual artefacts into his fourth-year class, after which Woollock then described how he used innovative practices such as visual methods and model making to assist students with both their learning and comprehension of environmental issues. Despite quite different methods, both approaches used as their starting premise the hypothesis that Japanese learners have a heightened proclivity for processing visual material, and that this latent potentiality which arises from the very visual nature of Japanese culture coupled with the ability to read, write, and process visually encoded *kan-ji*, makes these approaches warrant further inspection and broader use. Aside from this Japanese-derived inspiration both approaches all share the commonality of being highly progressive in nature and stepping students outside of approaches they may have encountered thus far in their secondary or even tertiary education. Whilst no quantitative data was gathered which might support or conflict with the rationale for continued use of these approaches, qualitative or textual data has emerged which indicates that (whilst not all), most students appreciated these classes as part of a mixed portfolio of approaches to learning English and/or content. Furthermore, that students were able to

personalize the learning experience is in keeping with Knowles' principle of andragogy and other progressive pedagogues such as Freire, Dewey, Giroux, McLaren, Neil, Steiner, Montessori, and Laurillard. In sum, the approaches recorded here not only helped stimulate students' interest in the content being studied but further enhanced their creative, critical, and development of high-order skills such as analysis, synthesis, criticality, deconstruction, and evaluation (Bloom (1956), Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)). The final conclusion the authors draw from their research is that further experimentation and enquiry is warranted and in keeping with the ethos of trying to find approaches to pedagogy/andragogy which encompass the largest number of our student in the learning transaction, then these methods are worthy of consideration.

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