

# DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND CELEBRATING LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN EFL

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the aims and development of a CLIL-based linguistics course taught over a fifteen-week semester at a Japanese university. Particularly, this overview attempts to justify the use of British and American English varieties to promote intercultural awareness and linguistic diversity in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. By acknowledging the colonial undertones of these two Englishes and using their ubiquitousness to highlight relationships with other varieties, it is possible to accentuate the prevalence and distinct features of other inner, outer, and expanding Englishes. In addition, the course is designed to familiarise students with some of the social issues that occur during interactions between speakers of different dialects and varieties and provide them with a platform to discuss these issues.

## INTRODUCTION

Immersing oneself in a language entails more than mastery of grammatical rules and pronunciation features. It also involves awareness of nuance, connotation, and perspective. Subjective concepts such as these can vary greatly between national varieties of a language (or what Murphy (2018) refers to as “nationlects”) and then vary again within local dialects. This adds an extra layer of challenge for language learners, especially of English, as the dominant lingua franca. One language does not equate to one culture, and recognising the geographical, social, and functional factors that affect meaning is crucial in successful cross-cultural communication. It makes sense, then, to integrate this knowledge where viable in the language classroom.

This article describes the process of curriculum development and materials design for a linguistics course taught over one semester at a language university in Japan. Titled *The Relationship Between British and American English*, the course employs a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach and is taught in an English-only environment. In this article, I will outline the motivation and rationale behind the course development and explain the benefits to the learner of scrutinising the differences and similarities between varieties of English. It will also provide justification for focalising British and American English, the varieties which already receive the most attention in ELT, to promote intercultural awareness and celebrate linguistic diversity in language learning.

## WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING?

A successful CLIL methodology considers each of the four Cs: content, communication, cognition and culture (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). As part of the fourth C, intercultural awareness is vital for CLIL, and its importance is increasingly acknowledged elsewhere in the wider realm of EFL. Korzilius et al. (2007) define intercultural awareness as the ability to effectively communicate with a cross-cultural interlocutor by understanding and adopting their perspective (p. 77). In recent

years, greater attentiveness has been paid to increasing cultural sensitivity and removing bias, discrimination, and prejudice from classrooms. Incidental opportunities for teaching intercultural awareness arise more often in multilingual environments, but it can and should also occur in monolingual contexts. Fostering healthy intercultural relationships is important for success studying abroad, in future careers, and for global citizenship in general.

## **RATIONALE FOR FOCUSING ON BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH**

There is a famous quote, usually attributed to George Bernard Shaw, denoting England and America as two countries divided by a common language (Marsh, 2010). This frequently refers to easily resolved vocabulary confusions about “pants” or “chips.” Sometimes it concerns deeper matters, such as accent or discourse conventions. However, such miscommunications are not limited to England and America; they occur whenever people are faced with a different variety of English than that with which they are familiar. Furthermore, these miscommunications are not limited to English. Most—likely all—languages contain standard and nonstandard dialects, and thus it correlates that they experience similar paradigms. However, British and American English are both common models in EFL classrooms and textbooks. They are also prominent in many areas of popular culture and media, and are therefore a familiar point of reference for many English learners. It therefore felt appropriate to use them to contextualise content that could later be applied more widely to other English varieties and other languages.

English education in Japanese schools leans towards American English. According to a study by Fukuda (2010), American English is also the preferred model for Japanese university students to learn. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering the close economic and political ties between the two countries. Nevertheless, Japanese university students regularly demonstrate an appreciation and curiosity for other language varieties and cultures. In addition, they are often especially interested to learn the similarities and differences between different dialects, and the social and historical dimensions that underpin them. Therefore, emphasising the diversity among English varieties and dialects and their relationships with one another became a principal objective when designing the course curriculum.

## **DEVELOPING THE CONTENT**

Having grown up in southeastern England, I speak a form of what is regarded as standard British English, also known as Received Pronunciation. My social environment and education shaped my early attitudes about what constituted correct grammar or spelling, which later became more descriptive when I started teaching. During my university studies, I gained considerable exposure to Professor Lynne Murphy’s work. As an American lexicologist and professor of linguistics at a university in England, much of her research is aimed at dispelling judgments held about English, for example, assumptions concerning lexical origins, dialect tropes, and nuance misunderstandings. Her work, in particular *The Prodigal Tongue* (2018), has influenced my disinclination towards considering English as consisting of prescribed *types* that exist within the boundaries of a country, rather than a constantly evolving entity that moves and changes with political, cultural, and social trends.

With limited prior experience in curriculum design, and none in CLIL, this was the first time to create my own course from the ground up. The idea came to me while reading *The Prodigal Tongue*, which makes observations about British and American English and their relationship. As an English teacher in Japan, frequent questions and comments made by my students about my pronunciation

and vocabulary usage mean I sometimes find my British English perceived as marked. This both amuses and interests me, as I come from a linguistic background where I am generally considered an archetype of my demographic. Hence, I noticed parallels between points raised in the text and my own experiences and discerned an opportunity to combine this with my students' desire for knowledge. Using a CLIL-based framework, I sought to merge my interest in pragmatics with the chance to promote cultural and linguistic diversity awareness in the classroom.

## COURSE DESIGN

The course is divided into four units and subsequent weekly topics:

*Table 1. Course Units and Topics*

Unit	Weekly Topics
1 Influence & Attitudes	history of English, attitudes to American English, attitudes to British English
2 Phonology & Dialect	standard dialects, non-standard British dialects, non-standard American dialects, linguistic stereotypes
3 Vocabulary & Semantics	lexical innovation, swearing and taboo language, slang and colloquial language
4 Pragmatics & Culture	politeness, communication style, irony and humour

### Unit 1 Influence and Attitudes

In Unit 1, students begin by examining the history of English, and in particular, how it evolved into today's British and American varieties. In the activity *An Invasion of Americanisms*, learners analyse, evaluate, and question the "anti-Americanism-ism" (Murphy, 2018) views communicated in a radio broadcast by British writer Matthew Engel (2011). Next, they unpack Murphy's claim about America's "verbal inferiority complex" (2018), which she says often occurs simultaneously with an appreciation of sophisticated British accents and phrases. The goal is to engage the students in a critical mindset from the start by presenting controversial viewpoints grounded in research and encouraging reaction and discussion. Although some students find creating their own discussion questions challenging at this early stage, this unit familiarises them with the general lesson format and sets the tone for the weeks to come.

### Unit 2 Phonology and Dialect

Unit 2 looks closely at accent and pronunciation and how they interweave with social issues like class and race. The unit opens by contrasting the standard British and American accents, then considers other nonstandard dialects in both countries. Students first gain exposure to features of regional British accents and the concepts of social stratification and classism. Then, they learn about racial problems faced by African American Vernacular English users in the US, and consider how these two topics reflect one another. As well as fine tuning their ability to distinguish phonetic features of an interlocutor's accent, the students participate in a dialogue about linguistic identity, discrimination, and stereotyping. They continue to use the questioning mindset established in Unit 1 to apply the content outside of the British/American context. Ultimately, they reflect on their own linguistic identity as both Japanese and English speakers.

### **Unit 3 Vocabulary and Semantics**

Unit 3 covers lexical matters: wordplay, swearing, and slang. In an OpenLearn from the Open University video (2018), the students listen to linguistics professor Jean-Marc Dewaele contrast multilingual swearing habits and gain insight into how and why English swear words are used in different geographical and social contexts. Also, after researching examples of new words that have emerged from different Englishes around the world, they observe how similar word formation processes are employed in slang creation.

Slang and profanity are popular topics among language learners, but instructors rarely broach them in traditional classrooms. Their divergence from the norm, potential for offence, and constant flux in form and usage, make them risky content. However, this raises a learning opportunity to promote intercultural communicative competence. The aim of this unit is to highlight the disparity in colloquial language use around the world, and the importance of continually assessing the linguistic environment we find ourselves in.

### **Unit 4 Pragmatics and Culture**

Unit 4 is concerned with academic theories of politeness and culture. In a TEDx Talk (2012), students listen to Professor Murphy attempt to debunk the “polite British” vs. “rude American” stereotype and explain how politeness norms in different societies can cause miscommunication. An introduction to Edward T Hall’s (1976) low and high context culture theory follows, and the learners compare the theories with their own successful and unsuccessful communication experiences. Finally, the unit ends with some time spent analysing types of humour and discussing cross-cultural attitudes to jokes and irony. All three of these topics have a wide scope in terms of intercultural relevance and applicability but are also the most cognitively demanding. They occur at the end of the course so that the students have time to build their confidence and develop their knowledge sufficiently to handle them.

## **COURSE ASSESSMENT**

### **Reflection and Vocabulary Journal**

As well as classwork activities and occasional pre-lesson homework tasks (which are usually to watch a short YouTube video and complete an accompanying handout), students write a reflection and vocabulary journal over the semester as part of their assessment. They choose any three moments from the course to reflect on, and complete three journal entries based on Rolfe et al.’s What? So what? Now what? reflective model (2001). They also record 15 new vocabulary items, including the parts of speech, definitions, example sentences and any appropriate collocations. The aims of the journal assessment are twofold. Firstly, it is intended to help them process the content and encourage independence in learning. Secondly, it is a useful tool for me to survey the students’ takeaways from the course and assess whether there are any areas that need addressing.

### **Final Research Project**

At the end of the course, students use the content discussed over the past 12 weeks to create a research presentation on an individual’s idiolect and present their findings and conclusions to the class. They may choose any proficient English user, regardless of English variety or first language. Ideally, they will interview a friend, family member, or teacher first-hand, but they also have the option to use online sources to research a famous person if preferred. They are free to focus their presentation on whichever linguistic elements they wish, but I scaffold the task with some suggested interview questions, research topic areas, and an example slides framework for support. Some past example presentation topics are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 2. Sample Research Presentation Topics

Research subject	L1	Research topics
Hugh Lawrie (actor)	British English/Received Pronunciation	Use of irony and humour/code switching dialects
Student's teacher	American English/Southern	Swearing/negative attitudes received from standard variety speakers
Student's girlfriend	French	L1 influence on pronunciation/swearing

The research presentation requires significant planning and preparation and utilises higher level thinking skills, which makes it a demanding yet appropriate activity to end the semester. The presenters have to select two or three salient aspects that emerge from their investigations, and they must explicitly outline the connections they have made between the course topics and their own research subject, justifying their analysis with specific examples and evidence. It is a daunting task for them when first introduced, but the overall quality of the finished products has shown it to be a successful final assessment.

## CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, the American and British *nationlects* are the most globally influential forms in the English language learning field. To reduce the sense of British and American linguistic imperialism, I make an effort to regularly draw attention to the prevalence and merits of other inner, outer, and expanding circle Englishes throughout the duration of the course. For instance, in Unit 2, when discussing standard English varieties, students participate in a listening activity that compares and contrasts authentic sample utterances from five different speakers, including Japanese, Australian, and New Zealand English. Also, in Unit 3, the students read about innovative vocabulary coined in non-inner circle Englishes; such as Singapore, Nigeria, and India; and later do their own research to find more examples.

In addition to promoting awareness of linguistic diversity in English, another aim of the course is to provide an opportunity for students to consider how the topics apply on a wider scale to Japan, the Japanese language, and themselves. As Clark (2017) points out, *othered* portrayals of Japan are persistent. These cultural portrayals exist both externally from Western media and internally from the *Nihonjinron* genre, which focuses on Japan's cultural uniqueness. Thus, there may be a temptation for some Japanese learners to initially view the issues raised as isolated to English-speaking cultures. To avoid this, I incorporate Japan-related questions in the discussion that occurs at the end of every weekly topic, examples of which are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 3. Sample Japan-centred Discussion Questions

Unit	Topic	Question
1	Influence of and attitudes to British English	What reactions or attitudes to different dialects of Japanese (or other language you speak) have you ever noticed or experienced? Explain.
2	Non-standard British dialects	How do you think the idea of <i>class</i> applies to Japanese society?
4	Communication style	What communication advice would you give an American friend coming to work or study in Japan?

Students' backgrounds and prior knowledge make some issues easier to discuss than others. For example, when discussing attitudes toward standard and non-standard dialects, having a mix of individuals from different areas in Japan helps to facilitate very meaningful, lively discussions because all the participants can personally relate in different ways. On the other hand, talking about matters like social class is more challenging, partly as the concept of social class is not as easily transferable to Japanese culture as dialect attitudes, but also because the learners have had less interaction with the construct. Nevertheless, with appropriate scaffolding before the discussion, they are capable of engaging in purposeful conversation about more arduous topics, and become comfortable sharing their opinions. This is commonly demonstrated during post-discussion feedback, when group members report original ideas that they credit having learned from their partner.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The overall reception to the course has been consistently favourable; there is always a positive attitude in the classroom, the attendance rate is high, and I have received second-hand comments about learner enjoyment from colleagues with whom I share the same students. Nevertheless, as an educator, I believe it is important to continually evaluate and work on my teaching where possible, so at the end of each programme I send out a voluntary survey requesting feedback on what the students enjoyed most and inquiring about any potential areas for improvement.

In every semester to date, swearing has emerged as the favourite topic, followed by equal preference for slang, UK and US accent differences, and linguistic stereotypes. The reasons supplied for all of these topics concern their practical usefulness or their influence on the students' beliefs or assumptions. For example, a frequent reaction to slang and swearing was satisfaction in better understanding how widely profanity can vary in offensiveness depending on the word and situation. Despite familiarity with common slang and swear words gained from TV and social media, most of the learners admitted they were unsure of how to use them and were unaware of the origins or nuances. Similarly, respondents who enjoyed the pronunciation-focused lessons noted that they can now more easily differentiate English speaker accents, and in one specific case, asserted that their listening comprehension had improved when watching dramas that contain

characters with British accents. In addition to these specific topics, another frequent student response was that everything was enjoyable, as they could see how all the content could be useful in their present and post-university lives, which was reassuring to hear.

Most of the constructive feedback responses pertain to practical aspects of the lesson (such as the best strategy for group discussion) rather than content. However, the Pragmatics and Culture unit tends to be described as difficult more often than the others, the politeness section in particular. This is to be expected, as there is limited time available to dedicate to some linguistically and conceptually advanced topics that are new to much of the class. Despite this difficulty, all three of the topics covered in this unit have been addressed in final research presentations by several stronger students, with communication style being the most frequent. In addition, topics from this unit are also commonly cited in many of the reflection journals, regardless of student level. This demonstrates that, while there is certainly room to improve topic accessibility for lower-level students, which could be achieved by increased differentiation in support materials, covering these advanced subjects has value for all the course participants.

The reflection journals are another source of feedback I have been able to learn from. While moments from a core selection of topics appear frequently (namely, linguistic stereotypes, swearing, and communication style), the overall content of the journals varies widely, with all the topics receiving at least one mention. This is useful because it suggests the content is both relevant to the students and valid for inclusion on the curriculum. There is some fluctuation in the depth of the So what? and Now what? journal sections, but this is common in student reflective writing tasks, as it is a skill that takes time and practice to master. To help resolve this, in more recent undertakings of the course I provided sample reflections from previous students (with their permission). This has made a difference, but perhaps giving a more structured template using sentence starters or more specific reflection questions would be helpful for lower level students in future.

A salient feature of the deeper reflections is a natural tendency to relate the subject matter to their native culture, even without any explicit instructions to do so. For example, one student contemplated the benefits of implementing a British-style *watershed* in Japan. In other words, she thought that allowing profanity to be broadcast after a certain time might increase Japanese people's understanding of swearing language and subsequently help to avoid inappropriate usage and misunderstandings. Comments like this indicate that students are independently applying the issues outside of the lesson, and that the cross-cultural mindset aims of the lesson are taking effect. Another characteristic that has emerged from the journals is a deepened awareness and appreciation for diversity in language and culture. This is commonly expressed in reactions to the Phonology and Dialect unit, in response to social issues of class, race, and stereotyping. It also arises in entries about politeness and communication style, and in one student's journal, touchingly manifested as an increased sense of self-worth. She reported that hearing foreign teachers and friends express the trope that Japanese people lack an opinion had affected her confidence, but after learning about the intricacies of high and low context culture, she understood that the Japanese simply say more with fewer words, and she now has pride in that rather than shame. These kinds of accounts suggest that the intercultural awareness aims of the course are being met, and they positively affect not only the students' knowledge, but perhaps also their morale.

## CONCLUSION

The design of this course shows how I have attempted to use the relationship between British and American English to raise students' awareness of the linguistic diversity in Englishes around the world and call attention to some of the social issues that exist within. Moreover, I have strived to highlight how being interculturally aware pertains to language, as well as habits and customs. The use of authentic materials throughout the programme and inclusion of several new or unfamiliar concepts make this a challenging course at times, even for high-level participants. Certainly, improvements can be made to make some topics (most notably in Unit 4) more accessible for lower-level attendees via increased scaffolding and differentiation of materials. That said, student testimonies show that overall satisfaction with the course is high, and the objectives are achieved, despite the difficulties. Much can be learned by examining attitudes to language use, both our own and other people's. Indeed, as Murphy (2018) remarks, "scratch a prejudice, and you can usually find a fear" (p. 10). A healthy attitude to language learning is a positive step towards achieving tolerance in the classroom, and it is my hope that cultivating students' interest in linguistic diversity may encourage them to continue seeking out the underlying issues and connections between language dialects and varieties in their post-university lives.

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