

A Field-Based Curriculum Designed to Teach English and Culture to Musically Gifted English as Second Language Students

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Abstract

An innovative, student-centered, field-based program was created to teach ESL and culture to gifted Chinese adolescent music conservatory students. This ESL Transition Program which is a one year program was designed to improve the students' English abilities, introduce them to U.S. culture and create a smooth transition to high school. This program accelerated the students' acculturation to the U.S. while improving their English. The students were taken on an extensive number of field trips (19) where they visited 50 sites of interest in Philadelphia. They received an insider's view of the city, its cultural institutions and its culture. As pre-high school students, they studied secondary school level subjects to prepare them for high school. These students who usually devote a large portion of their time practicing their instrument and studying music received a well-rounded education that did not interfere with their musical studies.

Keywords: field-based curriculum, curriculum, ESL, culture

1. Introduction

Most people do not have the privilege of creating a curriculum to teach ESL and culture to musically gifted students in an ideal learning situation. However, I was given the opportunity to create a curriculum for teaching English and culture to two gifted Chinese adolescent pianists at the Curtis Institute of Music. Curtis is a prestigious world-known music conservatory located in Philadelphia. As described in US Airways Magazine (2013) "The intimate Curtis Institute of Music, with an international student body of 160, a faculty of 90 world-class musicians, offers more than 100 recitals each year. On any given night the performers who range in age from 12 to 28, may include the next Hilary Hahn or Lang Lang-both are among the conservatory's long list of distinguished alumni. It's an accepted fact that tomorrow's musical legends are studying within these walls today." p. 98

The students whom I taught at Curtis can be characterized as prodigies as a result of having been admitted to Curtis. The term *prodigy* is defined as a person, especially a young one, who is endowed with exceptional abilities. According to Curtis president Roberto Diaz "They come in young and gifted. They leave us ready to take music to every corner of the world" (US Airways Magazine 2013, p.99). One view of the concept of giftedness as proposed by Renzulli (2007) is the interaction of these three characteristics: 1) above average ability 2) high creative ability and 3) high task commitment.

These exceptionally talented music students are the elite of the most accomplished music students because Curtis is the most selective music conservatory in the United States. In Fall 2011, only 3.2% of the applicants to Curtis were accepted (US News and World Report 2013). It is more difficult to become accepted to Curtis than Harvard or Yale (6.0% and 7.7% respectively) (The New York Times, 2013). These very talented students will become professional musicians after they graduate from the music conservatory.

One might think that music students do not need to express themselves clearly in English because they can let music express their thoughts for them. However, ESL music students who will become professional musicians do need to learn how to express themselves clearly in English. Jonathan Coopersmith, Chair of the Curtis Musical Studies Program, told the Curtis students at the Fall 2012 convocation that it was not enough to become professional musicians. They need to be able to say something about the music they perform. Musicians often discuss the pieces they perform in pre and post concert conversations and answer questions posed by audience members.

The creation of a specialized curriculum to address the needs of these newcomers to the United States can be challenging because of their high motivation to improve their English, to learn about Philadelphia and complete activities relevant to their future lives as musicians. Since there exists no field trip-based curriculum designed to teach musically gifted ESL adolescents, I decided to create the needed curriculum. A survey that I conducted of 10 music conservatories in the United States revealed that Curtis is unique in its offering of an ESL Transition Program. Although studies have been conducted about the teaching of ESL to gifted students (Vu & Vu 2012; Bermudez et al., 1991) no research studies have been conducted about curricula used to teach ESL and culture to musically gifted ESL students. Therefore, I decided to create a curriculum that was uniquely based on a field-trip curriculum to teach ESL and culture to this specific population. Field trips have been shown to be a successful

component of ESL curricula as used by ESL professionals (Fu, 2003; Numrich, 1996; Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985).

There are specific issues to consider in planning a course designed to teach ESL and culture to gifted music conservatory students. Curricula need to be created to teach ESL and culture to this population of students which address their specific needs as music students. For example, students need to improve their listening skills in English so that they can understand their music theory classes. Students also need to understand the subtleties of U.S. culture. For example, my students were not aware of the custom used in the United States of sending food back in a restaurant which is not cooked to their satisfaction. This practice is reflected in the saying "The customer is always right." My students did not understand the tipping custom and the practice of leaving money on the table in a restaurant surprised them.

Curtis initiated the creation of the Program designed to improve two gifted adolescent Chinese music students' English abilities and introduce them to United States culture. I designed the curricula for both semesters and taught the first ESL Transition Program courses in 2012-2013. I was given the freedom to create curricula that would spark the interest of the students and engage them in the classes. This was an opportunity to create curricula that would be based on the student's academic needs, interests and desires. The course was designed to improve the abilities of the students to express themselves clearly and comprehend spoken English. Additional goals were to improve the students' abilities to read and write English. Other goals were to improve students' understanding of United States culture and promote their cultural adjustment to the American classroom, to Philadelphia and life in the United States.

The students participated in numerous field trips to places of cultural and historic interest. They wrote essays about topics such as the importance of music and their instruments, becoming a music conservatory student, their cultural identity, self-identity and their identity as musicians. The Program curriculum is field-trip based and needs specific.

This article will examine the Program's goals, its curricula, the methodology used to teach the course and the students' progress in order to provide an understanding of the success of the Program.

2. The ESL Transition Program

Students enrolled at Curtis are accepted based solely upon their musical abilities and skills. Although Curtis already offered ESL courses to international students who need to improve their English, the conservatory recognized the need for additional support for pre-high school students to insure a smooth transition to high school. Thus, it acknowledged the importance of improving a selected number of its international students' abilities to speak, comprehend, read and write English. Curtis understood the need for these students who have a heavy practice schedule to have a well rounded education.

The Program which began in the academic year 2012-2103 consists of two-semester non-credit courses. Program students took concurrently an ESL basic skills class daily prior to class. The ESL class was taught traditionally with the use of grammar-translation methodology, exams as well as conversation.

The goals of the Program are threefold: 1) to enable the students to feel more confident in their ability to express themselves in English 2) to learn about the many artistic, cultural and historic resources that Philadelphia offers and 3) to be prepared to enter high school. The Fall course was designed to improve the students' conversation skills and knowledge of American culture. The Spring course was designed to prepare the students academically to transition to high school.

3. Description of Students

Who are these students? I will refer to them as the pseudonyms they selected themselves: Yanruo and Yunyi. Yanruo and Yunyi began studying the piano when they were five years old. Yanruo was born in *Yantai* which is a city located in the Shandong Province of China. Yunyi was born in Shenzhen *which is in the Guangdong Province* of China. Yanruo and Yunyi completed 8th and 7th grades respectively in China. Yanruo and Yunyi began studying at Curtis when they were 14 and 13 years old respectively. Both students are very intelligent, highly motivated, and diligent. They were excited about learning, which proved to be an important asset for them during the academic year. Yanruo described herself as an optimistic girl whereas Laurie considers herself to be easy going, hardworking and modest.

Yanruo wrote the following in her first homework assignment entitled Who Am I? (first draft): "Hi guys, I'm a Chinese girl, my name is Yanruo and I'm 15 years old, come from Beijing that big city. I'm a really optimistic girl, so please let us to be a good friends. Thank you. Piano is my major, I had been studied piano when I was only 5. Now, I'm a pianist at Curtis Institute of Music, here is the best music school in the world. So I'm a lucky girl I can study in here. Classical music is my favorite music, because I love Beethoven, Chopin, Haydn...too much. As a Curtis student, it means I'll have many opportunities to be a great pianist, musicians. It's my dream, I'm always strive for this dream. I'm sure, one day, my dream will comes true. That is me."

Yunyi described herself in her first draft of the homework assignment as: “Hi! This is Yunyi who is a thirteen years girl from China! To be frank, I’m very pretty! I am 165 centimeters tall. I have big eyes, black hair and two big hand. Sometimes, I don’t want to talk, I could use the piano to tell you what is my feeling and mood. Certainly, I love music. Music is the indispensable (part, thing) in my life. I’ve studied piano for 8 years. I have known Curtis is the most wonderful school in the World since I was a small kid. I can study in Curtis was a dream. But now, I’ve accomplished the dream. I need to study hard (sic) on English and piano! This just me! A thirteen years old girl from China.”

I attended many of the student recitals that Yanruo and Yunyi gave at Curtis where they performed virtuoso compositions such as Beethoven’s Sonata No. 18 in E-flat major, Chopin’s Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31, Mendelssohn’s Allegro brillante in A major, Op. 92, Paganini’s Variations on a Theme Op. 31 and Schuman’s Carnival, Op-9. Both students have traveled internationally and won first prizes in international competitions. The students will probably study at Curtis for eight years. Therefore, it was important that they become acquainted with Philadelphia and how to get around the city.

The students took the TOEFL Jr exam during the first week of the Fall 2012 semester. The TOEFL Jr which is given in a paper-based format to middle school aged students consists of three exams: 1) Listening Comprehension 2) Language Form and Meaning and 3) Listening. Both students earned a total score of 710 pts. The highest combined score possible of the three TOEFL Jr exams is 900 and the lowest score possible is 600. The students had similar scores for the Listening Comprehension, Language Form and Meaning and Reading Comprehension exams. The highest score possible for each of the three tests is 200 to 300 pts. Yanruo scored 250 on the Reading Comprehension exam, 240 on the Language Form and Meaning exam, and 220 on the listening Comprehension exam. Yunyi scored 245 on the reading comprehension exam, 235 on the Language Form and Meaning exam, and 230 on the Listening exam. Both students scored the lowest points on the Listening exam which is why they wanted to focus on improving their listening skills during the class. (See this website for the test design http://www.ets.org/toefl_junior/content)

Yanrou and Yunyi were extremely curious, learned quickly and applied learned knowledge easily to new contexts. According to Helen Lancaster (2003), of the Thai National Center for the Gifted, these two characteristics which are aligned with young gifted children are typical behaviors and characteristics associated with musically gifted children.

4. Curriculum

A highly flexible curriculum and schedule were created to benefit the students’ busy schedules. They learned the idiomatic expression “In the spirit of flexibility” which I used at various times when the situation called for flexibility. This was a highly individualized course as a result of its small size.

The Program courses are non-credit, non-graded classes that are offered as pass-no pass. The students were required to attend class every day because the classes satisfied their visa status as full time students. The requirements for both courses were: 1) attendance 2) participation 3) field trips 4) completion of journal assignments and 5) completion of homework assignments. The students went on 19 field trips during the academic year 2012-2013. They saw 50 sites of interest of Philadelphia during the field trips. There were six types of field trips: 1) music related 2) museums 3) sculptures 4) Philadelphia sites 5) supermarket/food markets and 6) shops. The students wrote journals after each field trip about their experiences.

I was able to take advantage of Curtis’ reputation to supplement our field trips with private tours to give the students a deeper understanding of the sites that we visited. The students went on five private tours that I set up by contacting the institutions before we visited them. Every institution responded positively by providing a private tour for us in order to give us additional insight about what we were seeing. There is no doubt that the reputation of Curtis opened many doors for us. We were given private tours of the two concert halls inside the Kimmel Center (the Verizon Hall and Perelman Theater) and were allowed to walk on the stage of the Academy of Music when no concert was taking place. The students received an insider’s view of the city by going on the private tours provided by the institutions as well as field trips conducted by me, a native Philadelphian.

Yanruo wrote in her journal (second draft) about our field trip to the Kimmel Center: “At the end, we went to the Academy of Music, which is very historic and also very brilliant. We went to the stage, which is very large, and I can imagine that one day, if I can play a recital there or Verizon Hall, it will be very exciting! I’m expecting it and striving it make this happen. This is my wonderful third field trip!”

Yunyi described the same trip in her journal (first draft): “Then we went to the Verizon Hall which is the largest concert hall! We followed behind a lady. She showed us the wonderful hall! There are 2500 seats there! I love it so much! And she told us there one hundred doors in the hall. They can be moved that depends on the kinds of performance. Also, we could not hear the noise from subway. It is so good for listening!! And the shape for the hall just likes a cello. We went to the stage in the Academy of Music, and Yanruo took some photographs. I saw many boxes of seats there. Just like the Scala Music Hall in Italy. I love both concert halls! I felt that I know

more and more and Philadelphia and U.S. culture.”

Yanruo wrote in her journal (first draft) about the field trip to Macy’s: “When we finished our lunch, we went to the Macy’s to listened to the Organ concert which is wonderful and fabulous. When we entered the Macy’s, there is a receptionist asked me whether I had an appointment. I said yes, and she took us to the up stairs then we saw that wonderful Organ which is shinning with gold. We viewed the Organ and said hi to the Organist. The Organ is very historic and brilliant, also the sound quality is pretty good. Our seventh field trip was finished with wonderful!”

Yunyi described in her journal (first draft) the field trip to Macy’s: “It was great! I was so glad that I could see many things in the same day! I am so lucky!”

It is evident that the students’ enthusiastic writing provided many opportunities to improve their command of English as they were directed to prepare third, fourth or fifth versions.

The Program curriculum also included 10th grade level GED (General Education Development) preparation materials and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) preparation exercises. It also included a focus on vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, formal and informal expressions, academic reading and writing, expanding their active and passive vocabularies including prefixes and suffixes. We focused on language arts, social studies and science with some math instruction. The students completed all of the listening exercises used in the Barron’s Practice Exercises for TOEFL Preparation (Sharpe, 2011). The nine movies that the students saw in class were incorporated into the curriculum. The students wrote a homework assignment about the movie Roman Holiday. They viewed the movie Schindler’s List in class and the next week we went to the National Museum of American Jewish History to learn more about the Jewish experience from historical and cultural perspectives.

On the last day of class the students and I walked to a nearby Barnes and Noble Bookstore in order to chat informally and wrap up the class. The students told me that they wanted to improve their English during the summer of 2013 when they were in China visiting their families and friends. We looked in the bookstore for an age and proficiency-level appropriate book. The students found the book entitled *Bunheads* (Flack 2011) about ballerinas. The students’ motivation to continue improving their English is shown by their request for summer reading.

5. Survey: Sites Visited and Movies Seen by Philadelphians

I conducted a survey in order to form a comparison between the number of sites visited by the students and Philadelphians. It was hypothesized that the students would have a broader knowledge of Philadelphia than people who live in Philadelphia because of the extensive number of sites that they visited during 2012-2103. The survey included a large number of sites in the downtown area of Philadelphia because many of these are located downtown. In addition, several shops and coffee shops were introduced to the students because they resided downtown and could make use of them on a daily basis. The survey also contained the movies shown to the students in class.

The criteria for participation in the survey were current residence in Philadelphia and residence in the city for at least two years at the time of the study. A total of 65 people participated in the study that included 48 females and 17 males. The participants have lived in Philadelphia on an average of 26 years with a range of 66 to 2 years (a standard deviation of 17). The 65 participants of the survey represent 22 neighborhoods of Philadelphia.

The survey directions told the participants to write a check before any site on the survey form that they had been to at least once or movie that they had seen at least once. There were seven types of sites in the survey: 1) music related 2) museums 3) sculptures 4) Philadelphia sites 5) supermarkets/food markets 6) shops/stores and 7) coffee shops. These sites consisted of 50 items in the survey. There were nine movies listed in the survey that the students had seen in class.

Table 1 presents the average number of sites that the 65 survey participants had visited at least once. The total number of sites that the students had visited was 50 sites. The table also presents the average number of movies that the survey participants had seen.

Table 1. The Number of Sites Visited and Movies Seen by the Philadelphians Surveyed
 N=65

	Mean	SD
Sites Visited	32	7.2
Movies Seen	4	1.5

It was found that none of the people surveyed had visited all of the sites that the students had visited nor had seen all of the movies shown to the students in class. The findings of the survey show that the students were exposed to a broader number of sites in Philadelphia than the Philadelphians who participated in the study. It was also found that not all of the movies shown to the students in class had been seen by the participants surveyed.

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of times that the 65 survey participants had visited the 50 sites in Philadelphia which the students visited during the year-long course.

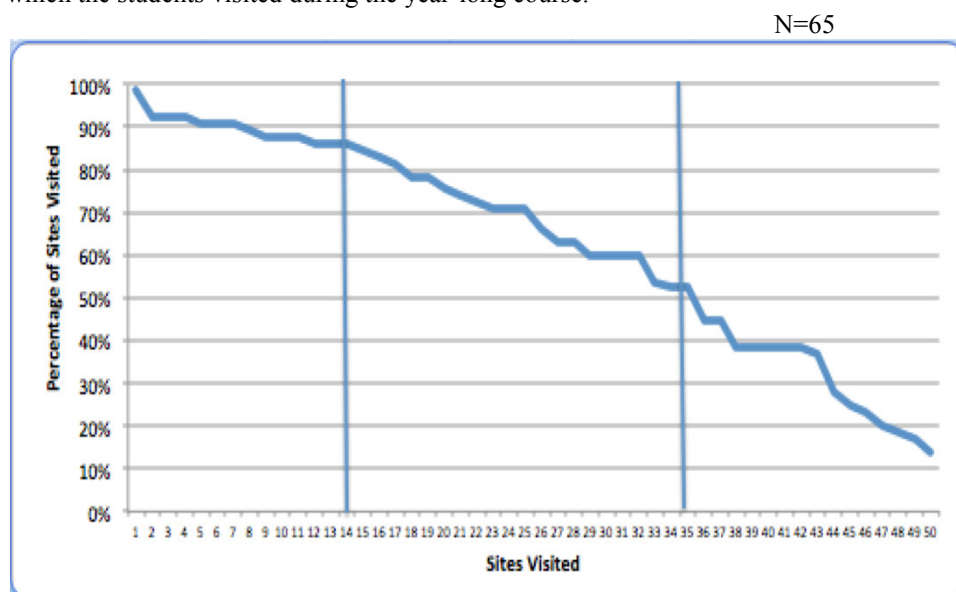


Figure 1. The Number of Sites Visited by the Philadelphians Surveyed

Figure 1 shows that only 14 sites were seen by 85% of the participants of the survey. One can also see that 35 sites were seen by only 50% of the survey participants. None of the sites were visited by all of the survey participants. The largest number of sites visited by the participants was 45 sites.

6. Students' Progress

Although no exams were used in the class the students' progress was seen through their journals, homework assignments and use of the vocabulary that were taught in class. A process approach was used in the class regarding the students' journals and homework assignments. As stated earlier, the students took the TOEFL Jr. exam in the first week of the course. The TOEFL Jr. is offered every two years which meant that students could not retake it at the end of the academic semester. No formal assessments were used in the class.

Below are the students' evaluations for the Fall and Spring semester courses:

Fall 2012

Yanruo: "In this semester I learned lot such as American history, Philadelphia culture, writing, vocabulary and TOEFL preparation etc."

Yunyi: "I think that I have learned a lot in this class such as American culture, Philadelphia history, Specials in Philadelphia, Vocabulary, Grammar, Field Trips, Idiomatic expressions etc. I have known Philadelphia more and more and my English is getting better and better."

Spring 2013

Yanruo: "I have learned more academy (sic) courses in this semester including Social Studies, Science and a lot of TOEFL Listening and reading which were very helpful. In addition, we learned some American Culture as well."

Yunyi: (sent from China)

"I have learned a lot from our ESL (advanced English class) in this semester. I did enjoyed the Listening exercises and pop culture very much. Not only these, but lots of vocabulary!! It is extremely important for us to be able to interact with people in English. I also appreciate the movies which opened our eyes and expanded our horizon. It was a very nice and cutting-edge way to learn a language. I have been wanting to say THANK YOU SO MUCH for all you have done for us!"

The students' progress in their writing abilities in English is evident when one compares their evaluations with their first homework assignments.

7. Conclusion

The Program provides an unusual opportunity to learn about the type of curriculum that can be created based solely on students' academic needs, interests and desires. I was given the freedom to create a two-course curriculum that addressed the students' academic needs, interests and desires. The result was a highly engaged class in which the students increased their English abilities and learned about Philadelphia. The conditions for

teaching and learning were ideal in the academic year 2012-2013 due to the small class size, use of extensive field trips, other interactive activities and the high motivation level of the students. The Program provides an important contribution to the types of curricula available to the field of ESL instruction. It accelerated the students' acculturation to the United States by giving them an insider's view of the city, its cultural institutions and its culture. Students who had a heavy practice schedule received a well-rounded education.

The flexible nature of the course makes it possible for the curriculum created for the Program to be used by teachers of students in other types of schools. This flexibility also makes it possible to make changes in future ESL Transition Program classes offered at Curtis. It will be of interest to see how well the students who were enrolled in the ESL Transition Program in 2012-2013 perform academically in high school in Fall 2013. Their academic performance and degree of acculturation to the high school can be used to modify the content and structure of the Program to improve its effectiveness for future students. How will the Program be modified in the academic year 2013-2014 as a result of a possible increase in class size, different student interests, English proficiencies and needs of the class members? Only time will tell. However, it is certain that as a result of the learner-centered approach that guides the Program, modifications will always need to be made in order to continue its success.

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