

# Culture. Language. Attitude. Performance.

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## ABSTRACT

The role of culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning and teaching is an often debated and arguably underexplored field within the EFL discipline. The following paper presents a pilot investigation into the interrelationships between student attitudes and performance within EFL discussion classes and self-reported measures of student engagement with extracurricular English language related culture. The results of the study show that although the TOEIC test used to allocate the students to discussion classes measures only reading and listening skills, they do bear statistically significant relationships to attitude and performance measures in speaking classes. Further, there are statistically significant relationships between the students' TOEIC scores and the degree to which they engage with English language culture outside of their prescribed classes. These results show promise for future research, and some suggestions are made of how this study can be built upon to extend the findings.

## INTRODUCTION

It is an often-held view, that learning about culture plays an important role in the acquisition of a second language because language not only facilitates the expression of experience, but also helps to create it. Further, language is not distinct from the way in which people think and behave, but rather is shaped and socialized within cultural contexts. Theorists argue that it is important for learners to have knowledge about and be competent in the culture of the target language in order that they are able to use language appropriately and pragmatically in the context within which it is to be communicated (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1995; Kramsch, 1998, 2010; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003).

Research has suggested that the importance which language learners place on cultural engagement in study-abroad contexts is interrelated to the objectives of study. Specifically, second-language students are more likely to engage with the target language community via its culture when the language learning is undertaken as part of an experiential, English-and-Enculturation (EAE), learning process (Ward, 2013). Conversely, cultural engagement tends to be deemphasized when language study is undertaken as a means to some other end. From the latter English-as-an-International-Language (EIL) perspective, second-language acquisition and use is viewed as an instrumental *lingua franca*, which may often be used in non-native English speaking contexts (Horibe, 2008). Other research suggests that a desire to learn the culture of a second language is linked to a desire to better master that language (Kramsch, 1998). Regardless of the position on culture taken by the second-language learner, it is important to stress that it may not be particularly easy to disentangle language from culture, and it may in fact be detrimental to the learner to attempt to do so. If we accept that language use necessitates, at a minimum, a speaker and listener (etc.), and that both parties come from and engage in particular cultural contexts, then culture in linguistic exchanges is inevitable. It may, however, be the case that the cultural context in which a particular linguistic exchange transpires may not be that of the native English speaker.

From the perspective of classroom language teaching and learning, culture can create some slippery problems, in that the classroom context is, for practical reasons at least, a necessary approximation of the outside world where *culture* takes place. While the role of culture in language acquisition is an often-discussed topic, the value of understanding culture in language learning is often reduced to a somewhat politically objectivized understanding of the imperatives, adiaphora and exclusives of particular discourse communities (c.f. Kramsch, 1998, 2010). While there is, no

doubt, a need to be sensitive to the cultural perspectives of those party to an exchange, less often is emphasized the instrumental value that learning culture may play in the exchange of language itself. From a sociological perspective, cultural knowledge is important, not only from the objective standpoint of understanding the sociolinguistic ‘what and how’ of particular dialogic contexts, but also a tacit understanding of how language plays out in particular situations. Thus, cultural knowledge also provides what is described as a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1984; 1991).

To clarify this, Jenkins (2002) explains the logic of culture by drawing an analogy between understanding the rules of a particular sport, and how these are variously exploited, bent and broken, in the context of an actual game. In the context of second-language-acquisition, and for the purposes of simplicity, we might think of the rules of the game as being the grammar, vocabulary, cultural aphorisms and so forth that are taught in the language classroom. In contrast, the game of language (c.f. Grayling, 2001; Wittgenstein, 1958) would be the outside world where the student is expected to put what they have learnt into meaningful practice in the absence of the support structures of the classroom (Kramsch, 2010).

With this in mind, why might cultural knowledge be important outside the classroom? Jenkins (2002) clarifies this using the basketball *travel rule* as an allegory. This rule is a straightforward edict that prohibits the ball-carrier from taking more than two steps after they stop dribbling the ball, and before they make a shot attempt or pass the ball to a teammate. While this rule is, in-and-of itself, reasonably straightforward, invigilating it in the context of a face-paced game of ten players is a nigh-on impossible task for the novice player. However, Jenkins (2002) argues, expert players’ tacit knowledge of how the game works means that cognizance of exploitation and violation of the travel rule itself does not come through some remarkable feat of vigilance and attention, but rather through an acute awareness of how violation of the rule interrupts the flow of the game. Adapting this logic to SLA, we can see that cultural knowledge is not only important in the sense of understanding what people from other cultures are likely to do, but perhaps more importantly, that it is a tacit resource for organizing, comprehending and acting within what could be an otherwise incomprehensible flow of sociolinguistic information (Kramsch, 2010).

As Kramsch (1998) suggests, meaning is not conveyed by discrete linguistic units, but rather how people use them in response to the demands of a given context. From the perspective of mastering a second language, enculturation allows the target language to be experienced as a facet of a totality of interaction rather than an amalgam of discrete sociolinguistic rules, which at best are unlikely to be strictly adhered to in the world outside the classroom (Kramsch, 1998). This adapted version of Jenkins’ (2002) allegory is also more broadly applicable in that it does not specifically pertain to a legitimate language context (such as *received pronunciation*), and as such it avoids being tarred with the hegemonic effects of linguisticism and cultural domination (Kramsch, 1998). It is a logic that can be applied to any context in which English (or other language) is an accepted mode of communication.

To these ends, the current pilot research paper aims to enhance an understanding of the relationship between language learning and cultural engagement by addressing the following questions: How do students interact with English-language based culture outside of prescribed learning contexts? How does student engagement with culture outside the curriculum relate to their performance and attitudes in language classes, and standardized measures of linguistic competence?

## **METHOD**

### **TOEIC and In-class Performance and Attitudes**

In order to assess the inter-relationships of cultural and language engagement, attitude and

performance (herein CLAP), the students' university entry assignment TOEIC reading and writing scores were compared with measures of their attitudes and performance in oral communication skills discussion classes. To this end, scales were developed to give a global indication of the students' spoken fluency, accuracy, confidence, willingness to communicate in English and attention to task in class. On each of these measures, the students were given a score from one to five (lowest to highest, respectively, see Appendix A.) These measures were taken at two intervals during a 14-week semester: midway in week eight, and again in week 12. These two measures were then aggregated. In addition to these indices, field notes were taken to qualify these observations, and to investigate patterns in student performance and attitudes that may provide avenues for future investigation.

### **TOEIC Scores and Extracurricular English Language Cultural Engagement**

In week nine of the semester, the students were given a questionnaire in Japanese and English asking them about the frequency outside of prescribed lesson time with which they speak to people, listen to music, watch television or cinema, and read in English (see Appendix B).

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample**

200 first-year university students, with a mean TOEIC scores (reading and listening components summed) of 484.73 (s.d. 159.48)<sup>1</sup> participated in this study. 86 of the participants were male and 114 female.

### **TOEIC and In-class Performance and Attitudes**

TOEIC scores were linearly correlated with in-class performance and attitude measures. On each criterion there were positive and statistically significant relationships between the participants' TOEIC scores and their: fluency ( $r = 0.65$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), accuracy ( $r = 0.74$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), confidence ( $r = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), willingness to communicate in English ( $r = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and attention to task ( $r = 0.44$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

To further investigate these relationships, a multiple regression analysis was calculated to predict TOEIC scores based on performance and attitude. A significant regression equation was found ( $F_{(5,192)} = 51.80$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with an  $R^2$  of 0.57. The relationship between the students' TOEIC scores and the predictor variables can be understood in unstandardized B coefficients in Table 1.

*Table 1.* Regression of TOEIC and Performance and Attitude

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	$\beta$			
(Constant)	129.34	65.46			1.98	.05
Fluency	44.31	20.32	0.23		2.18	.03
Accuracy	138.49	19.24	0.65		7.20	.00
Confidence	-41.34	13.03	-0.21		-3.17	.00
Willingness	-32.99	16.10	-0.12		-2.05	.04
Attention	23.50	17.26	0.09		1.36	.18 (ns)

<sup>1</sup> All results have been rounded to two decimal places.

Thus, the relationship between the students' TOEIC scores and the in-class measures of performance and attitude is expressed by the following regression equation:

$$TOEIC\ score = 129.34 + 44.31 \times \text{fluency (units)} + 138.49 \times \text{accuracy (units)} - 41.34 \times \text{confidence (units)} - 32.99 \times \text{willingness to communicate in English (units)}$$

For the purposes of comparison with the correlation coefficients presented above, the regressed relationships are qualified by examining the standardised  $\beta$  coefficients in Table 1. Table 1 shows that, when the predictor variables are regressed, their relationships to the students TOEIC scores are changed somewhat. Fluency and accuracy are still significantly and positively correlated to TOEIC performance. However, confidence and willingness to communicate in English are now significantly and negatively correlated, and attention to task is no longer significantly related to TOEIC performance.

### TOEIC Scores and Extracurricular English Language Cultural Engagement

For the purposes of simplicity, the frequency with which the students engage with English outside of class is examined linearly. However, it is important to note that the timescale which the students were asked to report on is actually exponential. This issue will be addressed further in the following discussion section.

Table 2. Cultural Engagement outside Class

Activity	Mean	Frequency x TOEIC
Music	3.31	( $r = 0.0.180, p < 0.05$ )
Speaking	3.25	( $r = 0.0.133, n.s.$ )
Movies & television	2.94	( $r = 0.198, p < 0.01$ )
Reading	2.61	( $r = 0.241, p < 0.01$ )

In order to better understand the students' interaction with English outside of the classroom, the pattern of engagement with culture is broken down in Table 3 below. Each category is ordered across the columns according to the rank with which the students reported along with the percentage that the students reported.

Table 3. Breakdown of Cultural Engagement with Percentages Reported

Speaking English					
Strangers	Non-Japanese Teachers	Japanese Friends	Non-Japanese Friends		
37.30	30.40	27.90	26.50		
Listening to Music					
Pop	Rock	Alternative / Hip-hop	Classic Rock	Dance / Electronic	Other
52.00	20.60	10.30	8.80	7.80	3.90
Watching Movies & Television					
English Soundtrack with Japanese Subtitles	Japanese Soundtrack	English Soundtrack Only			
71.10	59.30	20.06			
Reading					
Websites & Blogs	Textbooks	Novels	Magazines		
36.80	31.90	20.60	16.70		

## DISCUSSION

The current study has produced a number of interesting results that should provide fertile ground for future research. Firstly, there appears to be clear relationships between the students' university-entry TOEIC scores and the five global measures of performance and attitude used in this study. Specifically, increases in TOEIC scores correlate with increased spoken fluency and accuracy, as well as increased confidence, willingness to speak in English, and attention to the tasks they have been set. This is of particular relevance to the context from which the data was drawn because TOEIC scores (in this case, only reading and listening scores) are used by the university to allocate students to classes of which the core component is oral communication skills. Although it may be easy to argue that reading and listening skills may not be the best index of oral performance, the current study suggests TOEIC scores are a reasonable surrogate of performance in speaking classes.

However, the relationships between student TOEIC scores and performance and attitude are contingent on one another. In particular, confidence and willingness to communicate in English are negatively related when regressed against the other predictor variables, meaning that although these measures increase with TOEIC scores they relatively decrease. The field notes taken in class suggested that inaccuracies and unnecessary slips are more likely in higher-proficiency and more confident students, who, as Bourdieu (1991) suggests, appear to focus more on the game than the rules. This result is perhaps not unexpected, in that spoken language tends to be less grammatical or accurate than written form (Kramsch, 1998), of which the TOEIC exam is necessarily an advent. Further, this result may show a distinction between particular groups of students' motivation in relation to a relatively fluid and subjective in-class observation and their orientation to the much more objective TOEIC exam.

In the process of collecting data, assessing the confidence of students assigned to different proficiency classes proved problematic, as relatively high levels of confidence appeared to be broadly bifurcated in two ways. Firstly, as recorded in the in-class field notes, in some of the lower proficiency classes there were several (typically male) students who appeared to compensate for an apparent lack of English-language competence with false bravado: acting overly confident or

acting out in class apparently in order to mask inaccuracy, a lack of fluency, or simply to alleviate boredom<sup>2</sup>. Conversely, in particularly high-level proficiency classes a distinction was often noted between students who were “returnees” and “test-takers.” Returning to Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of cultural knowledge as a “feel for the game,” returnee students are likely to appear more confident in class, as they have been enculturated with English language in a relatively oral-centric, native-speaker context. In contrast, test-taker students can be noticeably less confident, and perhaps rely on objective language use that has served them well in standardized measures such as the TOEIC exam.

The relationships between TOEIC scores and cultural engagement outside of class appear to be less strong than with measures of in-class performance and attitude. The results show that although the participants did engage with culture with reasonable frequency outside class, there were comparably mild, but positive and statistically significant, relationships between TOEIC scores and listening to music, watching movies and/or television, and reading in English. There was no significant relationship between TOEIC scores and speaking to people in English outside class.

The first point to note in this regard is that these results may have been attenuated somewhat by the way this data has been simplified in the current study. The Likert time scales on which the students were asked to report on were, for the purposes of the current study, treated as though incrementally linear, when the intervals are actually exponential. To clarify, a student who reported engaging in an activity about once a month was scored two, and a student who reported that they did it every day was scored five, a ratio of 2:5. However, the actual temporal ratio between these is (at least) 1:28. One way to accommodate this discrepancy in future research may be to transform the frequency data logarithmically. This would more accurately emphasize the frequency that students engage with culture outside of class, and may strengthen the relationships between the variables of interest and the students’ TOEIC scores.

Although there are significant relationships between many of the variables of interest, there may be other factors involved that make the pattern of results more convoluted. In particular, student engagement with English outside of class is not simply reducible, as Kramsch (2010) suggests, to a unilateral desire to improve language skills. Firstly, it is important to note that the relative frequency with which the student engaging in each kind of activity is inversely related to the linguistic demands which the activities place on the students. (Compare music listening to reading, in particular.) Further, the more linguistically demanding the activity, the more highly correlated it is to the participants’ TOEIC scores.

To expand on this point, the activity the students are most likely to engage in is listening to music in English. In this particular instance, the students’ preference is overwhelmingly for pop music of a very restrictive range; Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, Carly Rae Jespen, and Ariana Grande tended to dominate the students’ listening habits. Indeed, according to Billboard Japan’s 2016 rankings, Justin Bieber’s hits *Sorry* and *What Do You Mean?* took places one and two respectively on the international artist charts (Okada, 2016).

There are two important points to note about the participants’ musical preferences. Firstly, anyone who has braved karaoke black spots such as Richie Valens’ *La Bamba* or Psy’s *Gangnam Style* will know that musical enjoyment does not necessitate an understanding of its mediating language. Secondly, the advent of global culture, mass marketing and (largely) Western cultural imperialism means that students are far more heavily exposed to pop music in other forms of

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<sup>2</sup> Instances of this included: manifestly over-reacting to other students ideas; stereotypic and deliberately excessive use of target language; and colour commentary intended to provoke responses from other students, rather than to constructively contribute to class discussions.

media (cinema, television, advertising, etc.) making it significantly more accessible to students than other styles of music (c.f. Kramersch, 1998). This is underscored by the results of the current study, which show the students are approximately five times more likely to listen to pop music than alternative or hip-hop genres<sup>3</sup>.

When the students' music listening habits are compared with their cinema and television watching, some other factors appear to come into play. With regards to cinema and television watching, again ease and accessibility appear to be determinant factors in engagement. Students are least likely to watch media when the English language-demands are high: when no Japanese language soundtrack or subtitles are available. Again, engagement tends to be a matter of convenience as Japanese subtitles tend to be more common in cinema new releases than Japanese-language soundtracked media. Further, as with music listening habits, cinematic preference closely aligned with popular culture and mass marketing in Japan, where the likes of box office successes such as *Harry Potter*, *Zootopia*, and *Frozen* were often watched by the participants (Boxofficemojo, 2016).

Lastly, the participants in the study reported that they were least likely to read in English outside class, and this was the most highly correlated activity with TOEIC scores. This is perhaps not surprising, given that reading enjoyment and comprehension largely rely on understanding written text which is relatively context-reduced (Kramersch, 1998). As such, a similar pattern of accessibility and ease emerges, where multimedia texts such websites and blogs are the most commonly read by the participants. Another interesting aspect of student reading appears to be obligation, in that textbook reading was also frequently mentioned. Novel and magazine reading were the least frequently reported activities. Further, the participants tended to list noticeably fewer reading titles than musicians or cinema titles. However, like cinema, *Harry Potter* and *Disney* titles were commonly mentioned. The relative infrequency of magazine reading may be reasonably expected as an advent of the relative cost of magazines and their being supplanted by online media.

Unlike the other three categories of activity, speaking in English outside of class was not statistically significantly related to TOEIC scores. Further, there appears to be a more even spread in terms of the types of people the participants spoke to. Interestingly, the most commonly reported kind of people spoken to was strangers and the least common was non-Japanese friends. Further research may help to clarify this pattern of results. Some possible explanations may include having to talk to non-Japanese customers in part-time jobs, and the relative lack of international students to befriend at the university where the participants study.

In summary, it seems that there is some degree of support for Kramersch's (2010) suggestion that learner engagement with the culture of a second language is related to a desire to acquire that language. This pilot study has shown an inter-relationship between in-class performance and attitude with performance on a standardized TOEIC test. Furthermore, there are modest, yet significant relationships with this same standardized measure and engagement with culture outside the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the current pilot study show some promising areas of investigation for further research into CLAP. In particular, this research has suggested that TOEIC scores are related to

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<sup>3</sup> As an interesting corollary to this, none of the students volunteered poetry among their reading habits. This tends to suggest that the lyrical form of language used in this medium may not have been the primary impetus *per se* for the students' engagement with English language music.

student performance and attitude in oral communication classes. In addition, these scores are also predictive of cultural engagement outside of the classroom. Further research could investigate the relative frequency with which the students engage with different kinds of cultural activity and better incorporate the absolute frequency of these into the statistical analyses. Other factors that may also warrant investigation could include: the amount of time the participants have lived abroad; their method of entry into the university system; desire to live abroad or use English once they graduate; extracurricular English study; and engagement with other non-curricular aspects of student life at university.

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### APPENDIX A – Performance and Attitudes Scale Criteria

#### Fluency

1. Speaks with a very noticeable number of pauses and takes significant time before continuing



2. Frequent pauses and takes significant time before continuing
3. Intermittent pauses, often takes time before continuing
4. Occasional pauses, but is able to continue quickly
5. Continues speaking at a proficient length and speed without pausing

### **Accuracy**

1. Agrammatical, rarely uses function words, and has limited vocabulary which impedes communication
2. Usually speaks using simple sentence patterns, relies on a limited range of vocabulary and basic verb forms, and often misuses or does not use function words
3. Usually speaks using simple sentence patterns and verb forms and has a basic mastery of function words and has a sufficient vocabulary to talk about familiar topics
4. Is able to use complex sentence patterns with sub-clauses, a variety of verb forms, usually uses function words, has a sufficient range of vocabulary to discuss familiar topics
5. Grammatically accurate spoken English with a wide vocabulary range at or close to a proficient level

### **Confidence**

1. Appears comfortable only during very controlled activities, and appears very anxious during fluency and discussion activities
2. Appears comfortable doing very controlled and semi-controlled activities, but usually appears anxious during fluency and discussion activities
3. Appears comfortable doing controlled and semi-controlled practice and preparation activities, but sometimes appears to be anxious during fluency activities and appears to be hesitant about joining discussion activities
4. Appears comfortable doing fluency, controlled practice and preparation activities, but sometimes waits to be invited by other students before joining discussion activities
5. Appears very comfortable communicating with others, particularly in fluency and discussion activities, usually initiates interactions with other students during activities

### **Willingness to Communicate in English**

1. Usually relies on L1 to articulate ideas and/or resolve communication breakdowns
2. Often relies on L1 to articulate complex vocabulary and/or resolve communication breakdowns
3. Sometimes relies on L1 to articulate complex vocabulary and/or resolve communication breakdowns
4. Rarely relies on L1 to articulate complex vocabulary and/or resolve communication breakdowns
5. Never relies on L1, even during substantial communication breakdowns

### **Attention to Task**

1. Rarely follows instructions, often distracts others, and uses target language infrequently and expediently
2. Usually follows instructions, sometimes distracts others, and uses target language intermittently and expediently
3. Usually follows instructions, occasionally distracts others, sometimes talks off topic and is occasionally distractible, but uses target language appropriately
4. Often on task, seldom distracts others or talks off topic and is infrequently distractible, and makes a good effort to use target language
5. Always on task, redirects others back to the task and maximizes opportunities to use target language

**APPENDIX B** – Student Questionnaire (Japanese translations omitted)

For the following questions, please circle one option to best describe you.

\* Some of the questions ask you to give examples of particular things you do. If you never do these things, it is OK to leave the answer spaces blank.

If you are unsure how to answer any of the questions below, please ask your teacher for help.

1. Outside class, how often do you speak to friends, other students or teachers, or people who you do not know in English?

never	less than once a month	about once a month	about once a week	several times a week	every day
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2. If you speak to people in English outside class, who are some examples of people you have recently spoken to?

1.		2.		3.	
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3. How often do you listen to music in English?

never	less than once a month	about once a month	about once a week	several times a week	every day
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4. If you like to listen to music in English, can you give some examples of artists you like?

1.		2.		3.	
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5. How often do you watch English-language movies or TV programs?

never	less than once a month	about once a month	about once a week	several times a week	every day
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6. If you like to watch English-language movies or TV programs, what are some examples of things you have recently watched?

1.		2.		3.	
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7. How often do you read non-class related materials in English?

never	less than once a month	about once a month	about once a week	several times a week	every day
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8. If you like to read in English, what are some examples of things you have recently read?

1.		2.		3.	
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