

## **Gatsby to Jobs: Concentrating on Culture in the Classroom**

by [Sarah Carol Kassas](#)

Before my ESL students at the University of Iowa started reading *The Great Gatsby* in class, Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* had already been released in theaters, and I recommended they see the film. One of my students remarked, "Oh, I didn't know that this was a novel. I thought it was just a movie." This was a good indication to me before our class started that while international students may watch American films or follow American celebrities, they are not all aware of the influence American literature has had on American culture.

Many international students arrive in the United States without the cultural awareness needed to successfully interpret content, participate in class discussions, and compete with their American peers. This can create a lot of frustration for them and can make it difficult to cope with the expectations of a university classroom. Furthermore, foreign students are interested in learning about and becoming a part of American culture. As one of my students remarked, "American culture is the thing that all overseas students want to know because we want to adjust to this environment. This land encouraged people to work hard, to try their best to do what they want to do, to achieve their dreams." Therefore, it is essential as language teachers that we find ways to expose our students to American culture or the target English culture in which the language is being studied.

### **Setting the Stage**

Literature is an effective way to expose ESL students to both language and culture. As Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) point out,

Because cultural awareness and sociolinguistic competence can be the most difficult aspects of second language learning and teaching, providing students a window into the target culture through its literature can be authentic and engaging for students to cultivate communicative competence. (p. 248)

### **Choosing Your Theme & Materials**

Begin by selecting a specific culture based theme when planning your course. An excellent option, and the one I'll outline using here, is *The Great Gatsby* and articles related to the 1920s, the Jazz Age, and the American Dream. Through these readings, your students can not only develop stronger vocabulary and learn how to analyze a classic novel probably enjoyed by their American peers, but they will also be exposed to a particular time period in US history. Students can explore how the American Dream started, how it changed over time, and the role it has played in American culture.

### **Host a Guest Speaker**

Once you feel that your students have a strong understanding of the subject, consider inviting a local entrepreneur, possibly an immigrant, to discuss his or her thoughts on what the American Dream means to him or her and encourage your students to ask questions. It is a good idea to ask them to write some questions beforehand. This visit will provide your class with an opportunity to connect the readings to a real person who is trying to achieve or is living the American Dream.

## Assignments & Projects

### Connecting With Music

You can make another culture connection to language by asking students to write and perform their own rap song. Lurhmann's film generated a lot of discussion about his choice to incorporate rap/hip-hop music into *The Great Gatsby*, which takes place in the 1920s, prior to the advent of hip-hop and rap in the 1970s. For a speaking and listening exercise, arrange for your students to watch relevant YouTube videos. For *Gatsby*, show them ["Great Music is Timeless,"](#) in which Lurhmann, Jay-Z, and actors from the film provide their viewpoints on using rap/hip-hop music in the movie and discuss whether or not the music hurt the way we view *The Great Gatsby* and the Jazz Age. Next, ask your students do a little research on when rap music started, how it changed over time, and on famous rap artists today. Adam Bradley's [Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip-Hop](#) is a great resource to help you build a background in hip-hop music.

After their initial research, your students can read lyrics to a rap song and watch an amateur rap YouTube video, preferably one with lyrics in subtitles, which will allow them to listen to the way the words match up with each beat. I chose an amateur rap song, ["The College Rap"](#) which also served as a prompt to discuss the expectations American high school students face as they prepare to enter university.

### Focus on Rap/Hip-Hop

If a local rap artist happens to live in your area, considering inviting him or her to your class for your students to consult with on their rap song. You can either try doing a general Yahoo or Google search, or if you happen to work at a college campus that has a theater or music department, you can email an instructor to try and get a name of a student that might volunteer to help you. Another option might be putting up flyers in your local library or community recreational center. My guest speaker was a university student who introduced my class to Aesop Rock's ["No Regrets"](#) which is a clean and thought-provoking rap song.

Through writing and performing their own rap song, students practice their language skills by selecting a topic, finding rhyming words, and writing multiple drafts. They also learn how to collaborate. One of my students responded, "I was not a big fan of hip-hop music, because it just sounded like loud and fast music. However, I learned that hip-hop is Americans' stories, their culture and their way to express their feelings." Here is a finished part of one group's lyrics:

You know, I'm just work for my A+ aim!  
And this is the time for going crazy  
The confusing verb tense  
My worksheets oh don't make sense!  
Upload it to dropbox  
before the time clock stops!

Note that even if rap is not an obvious part of your selected novel or a related film, it still can be worthwhile to ask students to write a rap about a main character or theme of the novel you are reading. For example, in an episode of *The Cosby Show*, Theo and his friend adapt Marc

Anthony's speech "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears," from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, into a rap song. See the clip and rap performance [here](#).

### *Focus on Jazz*

Because the setting of *The Great Gatsby* is the Jazz Age, it is also important that you arrange for your students to listen to some jazz music. When we were reading the novel, Iowa City was having its annual jazz festival. If your area doesn't have a jazz festival, you can borrow jazz music CDs from your university or public library. YouTube also has plenty of jazz music videos as well.

In addition to attending the jazz festival and writing their reactions to jazz music, I helped my students to become engaged in the community by volunteering at the festival. Volunteer work is a great way to get students out of their comfort zones and teach them a highly valued part of American culture. One student said,

American people focus more on action, not words. Helping people impressed me the most. People love to help people because they believe they are doing a good thing. Smiling is always the best way to communicate with others in this country.

Another student remarked, "I think this volunteer work is fantastic because it is a good way to get know with American culture and to make friends. I will be back next year." You can also get your students involved in volunteer work by contacting your local volunteer center and by asking people in your community who might be in need of volunteers. If you happen to work at a college campus, you can contact various university clubs to see if members know of current volunteer projects or if they are in need of volunteers for one of their personal projects.

### **Making Connections**

As the class progresses, you might like to show the film, [The Queen of Versailles](#), and ask your student to discuss and then write an essay comparing it to *The Great Gatsby*. This activity allows them to make connections between something traditional and more recent and recognize that themes carry across time.

Toward the end of the class, have students read, listen to, and discuss [Steve Jobs' 2005 Commencement speech](#) on American attitudes and expectations towards education. Jobs used several idioms throughout his speech that your students can learn and practice. Then, ask them to write and deliver their own motivational speech, incorporating an idiom that related to their topic.

### **Conclusion**

Focusing on American culture not only helped my students to become comfortable with the culture that they are living in, but it also clarified the expectations of an American classroom. As one student said,

About the class environment, it's also different from my own country. Students are so comfortable on how they sit, look and talk. There is no dictatorial behavior from

teacher's side. Teachers are always feeling responsible and looking for what their students need.

Concentrating on culture in the classroom, if well planned, can make students feel clued in to their new environment. It is also a way for instructors to stay in touch with current trends that young people are following. Once you choose a novel to build your course around, you can select meaningful culture references and appropriate language purposes—research, journal writing, script/play writing and performance, speeches, interviews, vocabulary, grammar, critical thinking, and field trips. Remember, we don't have to hesitate to teach a particular novel because it is too immersed in American culture—we can embrace it.

### **References**

Hedgcock, J. & Ferris, D. (2009). *Teaching readers of English: Students, texts, and contexts*. New York, NY: Routledge

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