

TEACHING ABOUT POLICE BRUTALITY THROUGH MUSIC

Tema

Dans un pays largement homogène comme le Japon, enseigner le racisme aux lycéens d'une manière pertinente et adaptée nécessite l'utilisation de ressources variées. Cet article présente une séquence didactique utilisant quatre chansons d'artistes afro-américains dans le but d'initier des lycéennes d'une école privée au Japon à la question des brutalités policières aux États-Unis. Les chansons choisies, exemplifiant l'oppression et la brutalité policière au cours des 50 dernières années, sont complétées par d'autres ressources permettant d'enseigner le contenu, le vocabulaire et la pensée critique en lien avec l'expérience afro-américaine actuelle.

I taught 2nd year high school students at a private girl's school in Japan about police brutality and the African American experience through songs by four different African American artists: Michael Jackson, Beyoncé, James Brown and Alicia Keys. Other resources utilized in this elective class included the film "The Hate U Give" (2018), interviews and videos on YouTube and an original interview with an African American teacher working at the school. Utilizing music and many other primary sources, this course helped students expand their English vocabulary, learn about American culture, and reflect on and discuss challenging current events related to racism. Students seemed very curious to learn more about racism abroad, with many seeming to think that there was not much racism in Japan.

While the topic of police brutality was linguistically difficult for English language learners, I introduced vocabulary from the songs and other sources, prepared pre-viewing guides, and regularly checked for comprehension through discussion

questions and collecting student work. The students seemed to appreciate being able to discuss a difficult, relevant topic, and their vocabulary related to the subject matter steadily improved. Initially, most students had little background knowledge of words related to the topic, but over the semester, they heard many of the same new words they were taught in a variety of settings, through songs, YouTube videos, "The Hate U Give," and the video interview. At the beginning of the course, students were not able to understand the content or differentiate between "discrimination" and "segregation," but after continued review and practice, most students were able to use the words correctly on their final exam. Students also seemed to enjoy the materials used to teach the content matter, including "The Hate U Give." When doing a Character Sketch project the following semester, students chose one character from any of the four movies they had seen over the year. More than half of them chose one of the characters from "the Hate U Give," the movie used in this unit.

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At the time this unit was taught, the fall of 2019, police brutality had not appeared much in the Japanese news. However, in 2020, George Floyd's death and the protests that followed have been prominent in Japanese news. Protests have occurred in multiple cities around Japan, and Naomi Osaka, a professional tennis player representing Japan, has been outspoken in her efforts to address racial discrimination. She boycotted the Western & Southern Open semifinals, which were rescheduled so she could participate, and publicly wore masks with the names of different African Americans killed by the police written on them (Hara, 2020). It is my hope that students who took this elective class last year are better able to understand and explain to others in Japan why these racial issues are such a big problem in the United States today.

Most high school students like music, so using songs to introduce the unit helped cultivate their interest. Song lyrics can contain relatable elements and music can trigger emotions, helping students connect to the content of the lyrics in a more powerful way. In this class particularly, many students were members of chorus, brass band, guitar club or English musical club.

At the school where this unit was taught, summer homework is commonly given, so students were given the assignment of listening to songs by African American artists and then writing reflective journals, utilizing their critical thinking and song analysis skills. When students returned from summer vacation, I led in-class discussions related to the songs and used gap-fill activities in class for listening practice. Many students wrote in their weekly reflective journals how much they enjoyed some of the songs, and one student wrote that she had listened to one of the songs over and over again throughout the summer.

Summer Homework: Weekly Journals
S2 Oral English Elective (Engle)

Next semester, we will be learning about what it means to be Black (African American) in America. African Americans have their own unique, beautiful culture, but they also continue to face racism, especially police brutality and mass incarceration.

- Write 7 weekly journals for summer homework on the topics given below.
- Write at least 150 words for each week and please don't forget to count your words. For the song analysis, please listen to the song and read the lyrics. Each of the songs connect with the theme of being black in America, so please keep that in mind as you listen.

Week 1	Topic: What do you know about African Americans? What do you want to know about African Americans?
Week 2	Topic: Listen to the song "They Don't Care About Us" by Michael Jackson (you can find it on Youtube) and write a song analysis.
Week 3	Topic: What do you know about racism? Where is racism a problem in the world today?
Week 4	Topic: Watch the movie trailer "The Hate You Give." (Search: The Hate You Give official trailer). Summarize the trailer and write about your impressions.
Week 5	Topic: Listen to the song "Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud" by James Brown and write a song analysis.
Week 6	Topic: Listen to the song "We Gotta Pray" by Alicia Keys and write a song analysis.
Week 7	Topic: Listen to the song "Freedom" by Beyonce and write a song analysis.

The songs students were introduced to were “They Don’t Really Care About Us” (Michael Jackson, 1995), “Say It Loud” (Eliis & Brown, feat. James Brown, 1968), “We Gotta Pray” (Alicia Keys, 2014), and “Freedom” (Beyoncé, Coffer, Lamar, Lomax, Lomax, Sr., McIntosh, Tirado, Williams, feat. Beyoncé & Kendrick Lamar, 2016). Michael Jackson and Beyoncé were artists known by most of the students, while James Brown and Alicia Keys were new to most. The songs were from three different decades, which helped show oppression and police brutality over the last 50 years.

“They Don’t Really Care About Us” (1995), considered one of Jackson’s most controversial compositions, includes lyrics like “I am the victim of police brutality,” “black man, blackmail, throw the brother in jail,” “Some things in life they just don’t want to see, but if Martin Luther were living he wouldn’t let this be, no” and the main chorus “All I want to say is they don’t really care about us.” The song was particularly popular in Europe, and also gained additional attention during Black Lives Matter protests (Caulderwood, 2014). To check for understanding, students were asked questions like, “Who is ‘us’ and who is ‘they?’” and “How could we interpret the ‘things in life they just don’t want to see?’”

James Browns’ “Say It Loud” (1968) is a song celebrating black pride. “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud” is repeated many times throughout the song. It starts out addressing oppression, then moving on to saying that now is the time to demand opportunities to “do things for ourselves” instead of “working for someone else.” Since the song was about being proud to be black, students discussed the parts of their identity they were proud of and if they might struggle to still feel confident if they were discriminated against. Students were also asked to discuss their in-

terpretation of the powerful lyric, “We’d rather die on our feet than live on our knees.”

“Say It Loud” Discussion Questions:

1. This song is about being proud to be black. What parts of your identity are you proud of? If you were discriminated against, would you still be proud of that part of your identity? (Examples- gender, race, religion)
2. Think about the lyrics, “We’d rather die on our feet than be living on our knees.” Would you rather be treated badly and live, or fight for your rights and die?

The more recent “We Gotta Pray” (2014) song by Keys is said to have been written in response to recent incidents of police brutality, specifically the killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown. The song’s music video shows clips of support and protests from around the world. Lyrics include “Fire in the air, what the hell going on, sirens everywhere” and “We gotta pray, pray for the world tonight.” As the school where this unit was taught is a Christian school, one discussion question asked was, “Is praying enough to fight police brutality?”

“We Gotta Pray” Discussion Questions:

Chorus:

We, we’re extraordinary people
 Livin’ an ordinary life, one extraordinary question
 Are we gonna run or fight?
 So we gotta pray

extraordinary: extremely good or impressive

1. Why do we have to pray for the world tonight?
2. Who are the “extraordinary people”? Why are they “extraordinary”?
3. What is the “extraordinary question”?
4. In verse 2, the lyrics say “End of the day, pray for another try.” Why should we pray for another try at the end of the day?
5. Do you think praying is enough? Why/why not?

Song lyrics can contain relatable elements and music can trigger emotions, helping students connect to the content of the lyrics in a more powerful way.

Another recent song covered in this unit was Beyonce's "Freedom" (2016). The lyrics in this song cry out for freedom from oppression and the chains of racism, and convey the strength of self-reliance in the lyrics "I break chains all by myself, won't let my freedom rot in hell." Beyonce's performance of "Freedom" at the BET Awards in 2016 led to many reactions showing empowerment on social me-

dia with the hashtag #BeyonceFreedom, including, "What a POWERFUL performance last night," "We refuse to believe the bank of justice is bankrupt #MLK," and "Starting to feel real Black powerish." (Phelps-Ward, Allen & Howard, 2018)

Along with in-class song discussions and listening activities, a variety of YouTube clips were utilized to introduce mass incarceration, the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality in jaywalking citations, and the police killings of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and Tamir Rice, increasing students' general knowledge about these issues. After students had accumulated some knowledge of the subject area, they wrote interview questions for an African American teacher at their school. Students compiled a list of questions as a class, and I then used those questions to interview my colleague, the interview of which was videotaped. The students were shown the video interview in class and given access to the recording to review the content.

Teaching about racial issues takes adequate research and preparation, but thanks to the abundant materials available today, it can be accomplished more easily.

Interview Questions
<p>Do you feel discrimination in Japan? Do you get more discrimination as a Black woman than a Black man would? At what age did you start to notice being discriminated against? Have you ever done anything to fight discrimination? How did you learn about discrimination and black history at school? You always wear colorful dresses. Does your fashion style come from Black culture? What words should we use to refer to black people, and what words shouldn't we use? What do you think about discrimination these days? Are you sad or angry when asked about racism? Do you think we can be anti-racist while allowing freedom of expression? How did discrimination change when Obama was elected as president?</p>

The final part of the unit was showing the movie "The Hate U Give" (2018). The main character of this movie, Starr, is a female high school student struggling with her identity as an African American living in a black neighborhood while attending a primarily white private school. Since all the students in the class were female high school students at a private school trying to find their identity as well, students were very much able to relate to the protagonist. Starr witnesses a case of police brutality and it takes courage for her to speak up about it.

Students were evaluated informally, through discussions, class participation, and worksheets, as well as formally through a midterm and final exam. Questions on the midterm and final exam evaluated students' ability to think critically about the songs and issues presented in class. A few of the exam questions are provided below.

Exam Questions to Evaluate Critical Thinking

1. Think about the lyrics "We'd rather die on our feet than be living on our knees" from James Brown's song, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." Why are these lyrics important for African Americans?
2. In response to Alicia Key's song, "We Gotta Pray," why does she say we need to pray, and do you think praying is enough?
3. Compare and contrast views about race and racism from the video interview with Starr's views.

After teaching this unit, the language aims were fulfilled. Students were able to analyze and discuss songs presented in class by African American artists. Students heard and saw views about race from a variety of sources, including a video interview with an African American teacher on campus, "The Hate U Give" movie, and YouTube clips, and were able to compare and contrast them. Initially students were not able to use vocabulary related to racial issues, but by the end of the semester they were able to use these vocabulary words both on worksheets, exams, and in in-class discussions.

If this unit were to be taught again, I would have liked to have student discuss and think about the racism present in Japan more formally. Racism in Japan was mentioned in a few class activities, but from week 3 of students' summer homework, in which they wrote about racism in the world today, students generally treated racism as a foreign problem, something separate from their lives.

Teaching about racial issues takes adequate research and preparation, but thanks to the abundant materials available today, it can be accomplished more easily. It is my hope that other teachers around the world can utilize primary sources while teaching about police brutality, helping expose students to this crucial, pertinent issue.

References

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