Theoretical Rationale: Understanding the Practical and Theoretical Foundations of the Unit

The southern United States is a fascinating region filled with unique culture, music and food. Particularly hard-hit by the American Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction, the South, as the region will be referred to throughout this rationale, offers a unique and complex look at American history. In songs by Southern artists today, the Civil War is still brought up. As interesting and important as it is for Americans to understand this history and region of the country, so, too, can the region and its history, culture and music be particularly interesting for non-native speakers or people of other countries to learn about. Through the unit we have created, we hope to introduce students to this fascinating region of the United States.

This unit is designed for high-level students with an avid interest in American culture or music. The lesson plans accompanying the unit demonstrate that we envision this unit being a part of a class studying the United States regionally. Each unit would focus on interesting aspects of the region and ask students to demonstrate various skills. It is highly likely that this unit would be the second of a semester, as we have the unit focusing on the South following the unit focusing on the Northeast.

In the unit focusing on the South, students are utilizing mostly their reading comprehension skills. Each lesson in the unit includes schema activation discussion questions, a reading passage and a reading comprehension quiz. Videos with illustrative music for that lesson accompany each reading passage. Lyrics or cloze activities are available for students to look at while listening to the music in the videos and videos are available for students to watch as many times as they wish.

Students will be asked in this unit to read a text, watch the accompanying videos and then complete a comprehension quiz over the text and vocabulary words for each lesson. In this way we will test their formative knowledge throughout the unit. Each lesson follows the same pattern of glossed text, supplementary videos and reading comprehension quiz to create coherence throughout the unit and allow students to work through the unit with as little confusion as possible. Following students’ completion of the four lessons, they will complete a summative post-test. In this post-test students will be asked to consider the information they learned in each of the four lessons and apply that knowledge to a more difficult set of questions than the reading comprehension quizzes following each lesson.

While we have developed this web-based teaching unit as part of a course which we envision also meeting face-to-face, the activities and directions for the activities where students are engaged with a computer are either intuitive or clearly explained. We have taken care to avoid anthropomorphic references to the computers while developing the lessons and also would take care to do this in face-to-face instruction with students. This is consistent with Meskill, et. al’s (2002) categorization of language teachers using technology in their classrooms. While the developers of this unit certainly do not consider themselves to belong to the
“expert” category in the study by Meskill, et. al., we certainly aspire to this level of technology use in the future.

The activities have been designed by the unit developers so that we have already balanced the teacher and learner control in this unit that we desire. For example, we instruct students the order in which to complete the lessons—first culture, then history, jazz music, and country music—but students have control over which glossed vocabulary words they click on and how many times they watch the videos.

Images have also been included for glossed vocabulary in some cases. Chapelle (2003) reports that research has indicated that images used in conjunction with a verbal explanation of a vocabulary word can significantly increase the learner’s likelihood of retaining that word. We have, thus, for certain words included an image along with the verbal explanation of a word. The words for which we have done this are largely those words which can be concretely depicted with an image. Various musical instruments in the country music lesson have been glossed in this manner, for example.

Another strategy we have employed for vocabulary retention is repetition. Before students encounter vocabulary words in the text for each lesson, the lesson plans indicate the instructor should introduce six of the vocabulary words by sharing pictures depicting the vocabulary words or providing students with example sentences including the target vocabulary word. Chapelle (2003) tells us repetition is one way of making input salient. Through pre-lesson vocabulary activation, vocabulary encounters in the glossed text and post-lesson comprehension quizzes including vocabulary words, we have created repeated encounters with the target words in order to increase the likelihood of vocabulary retention.

While the videos are largely included for supplementary or illustrative purposes, care has also been taken in their inclusion to ensure students are able to take away meaning from them. Students are instructed first to read the passage pertaining to that lesson and then to complete the activities with the videos. This is meant to limit the distracting potential of the videos contained in the text.

Where appropriate, lyrics or a cloze activity have been included with the videos for students to refer to while watching and listening to the video. Students are asked to complete the cloze activities in the jazz and country music sections, but have the option of viewing lyrics for other videos. We gave students this control because while research by Winke, Gass, & Sydorenko (2010) indicates that captions are beneficial for students because students have a need for multiple inputs and

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1 As Godwin-Jones (2010) tells us, “because there does not seem to be a consensus on the best universal approach to providing comprehension aids to texts, it may be advisable to provide a variety of options to the learner and allow for some degree of personal choice and customization” (5). Future considerations for the glossed words to allow for this could include, but not be limited to, directing students to linguists’ tools (we are targeting high-level students in this unit) to help them understand vocabulary, promoting use of word list software for retention of vocabulary words, or encouraging pair work in conjunction with vocabulary learning. For the purposes of this assignment, time restraints did not allow us to consider these options, but would be issues we could consider in the future.
captions reinforce visually what is being taken in aurally, their research also indicates that findings are mixed when it comes to when captions are introduced. Again, as we are targeting language learners with a high proficiency level, we have chosen to give students a higher level of learner control and more moderate teacher control, which Hubbard (2004) tells us is important for higher-proficiency students.

As English language teachers in the twenty-first century, we have to be aware of the technology our students are perpetually plugged into—ipods, social networking sites, YouTube, etc. These technologies can be successfully integrated into the English language classroom. In this unit, we attempt to incorporate “familiar territory” for our students by using videos from YouTube. The videos, combined with our texts, glossed vocabulary words and balance between learner and teacher control create a unit which will engage and excite students while teaching them about a fascinating region of the United States.

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2 Our group understands the difference between captions and providing accompanying lyrics for a video. Again, time constraints prevented us from being able to actually caption our videos, although this is certainly easy enough to do with YouTube videos. We have included the lyrics because they provide the same benefits as captions do. In the future, when implementing this unit in a real class, individual instructors could decide how beneficial subtitles on the videos would be.
References


