
Reviews of Books

Haruko Toyama, *Enjoy English with Charlie Brown and Friends: Language and Culture in Peanuts*. Tokyo: Nun'un-do, 2008. 92p. ISBN978-4-523-17584-1, ¥2,100.

Charlie Brown and his friends in the famous comic strip *Peanuts* have come to represent part of the popular American culture. *Enjoy English with Charlie Brown and Friends: Language and Culture in Peanuts* uses these famous cartoon characters and presents some American cultural issues as topics for English learning. The book can serve as an interesting textbook for content-based instruction (CBI) for Japanese English learners. Both the content and language level of the book are appropriate for college-age English learners of intermediate level and above. The book comes with a student CD and a teacher's manual that includes Japanese translations of the reading texts. I have used this book for a five-day intensive course and covered 10 topics out of the 12 chapters. Overall, it is a well-designed CBI textbook that incorporates interesting content and meaningful language skills.

Content-wise, readers can see that the book covers a broad range of cultural issues by simply looking at the titles and themes of each chapter: Chapter 1 - "Body Language in *Peanuts*" (non-verbal communication); Chapter 2 - "Lucy's Psychiatry Stand" (money and social status); Chapter 3 - "Friends Forever" (modern life and stereotypes); Chapter 4 - "*Peanuts* as a Social Group" (sense of belonging); Chapter 5 - "Schroeder and Music Lover" (personal and group identity); Chapter 6 - "Girls in *Peanuts*" (sex and gender); Chapter 7 - "Sally and Her Legal Beagle" (law and social harmony); Chapter 8 - "Linus's Security Blanket" (sense of security); Chapter 9 - "Crabby Lucy" (culture and humor); Chapter 10 - "Someday My Great Pumpkin Will Come" (religion and faith); Chapter 11 - "Good Grief! It's Valentine's Day" (love and romance); and Chapter 12 - "The Life and Work of Charles Schultz" (essence of *Peanuts*).

Most of these topics are appropriate for Japanese college students; however, some students might find unfamiliar topics, such as law and religion, difficult to relate to. Additionally, in the intensive course, students seemed to have a hard time applying some topics, such as "social groups," "personal and group identity," and "a security blanket/sense of security," in an academic setting. These students, in their discussions and writing exercises, were heavily inclined to approach the topics in more informal terms, namely, "friends," "hobbies," and "safety." This may be due to their limitations in English language ability, making expressing their opinions on these topics difficult. However, I also believe that the students had some conceptual problems understanding and relating to the academic nature of the topic contents, though student's level of maturity might be at issue here. Therefore, the content of the book might be more suitable not only for high-intermediate/advanced learners but also for more matured learners.

As far as language instruction is concerned, this book incorporates different skill areas very well. Each chapter of the book consists of the following components: Cartoon 1, a short explanation of Cartoon 1 (in both English and Japanese), vocabulary and "everyday expression" sections, a short translation

exercise, verb review, listening exercises, Cartoon 2, a reading text, questions on the reading text, and some discussion questions. The book, thus, covers listening, speaking, reading, vocabulary and grammar; additionally, because it presents interesting cultural issues, writing instructions and assignments can easily be incorporated into lessons by using these topics.

One of the good points of the book is that it incorporates a review of basic vocabulary related to the topics. Some of these seem to be too easy at the first glance, but they are actually very helpful. For example, in the “Guessing the Words” section in Chapter 1, students are asked to complete the following words related to “supper”: *d_nn_r*, *br_nch*, *des_ert*, *app_tizer*, *re_ta_rant*, and *Today's Sp_cial*. Some students had problems not only with the recognition of the words such as *brunch* and *appetizer* but also with the spelling of these words. Therefore, this exercise, used with the first cartoon in the chapter, serves as a warm-up activity to introduce both basic vocabulary and background knowledge to the chapter content.

Another section of the books that seems to be fundamental yet is very beneficial is the section of verb reviews. In this section, 12 basic verbs and idioms related to these verbs are reviewed. The twelve verbs covered are: *make*, *give*, *run*, *come*, *get*, *take*, *put*, *set*, *see*, *turn*, *do* and *go*. The book also provides brief explanations of the basic meanings of the verbs and examples of idiomatic expressions. I found this section particularly useful for our students, who tend to think they know these verbs but actually are not quite sure of how to use idiomatic and colloquial expressions associated with these verbs.

After the verb review section are some listening exercises. The student CD contains both “listen and repeat” exercises of sentences using idiomatic expressions and “fill in the blanks” exercises. These listening exercise sentences are short; therefore, they are relatively easy as a listening activity. In the intensive course, I tried some repeating exercises using these sections. Additionally, shadowing exercises can be incorporated here. Both repeating and shadowing are used as interpretation training techniques, and the effectiveness of both techniques are well recognized for language learning (e.g., Shibata, 2004; Tamai, Someya, Tanaka, Tsuruta, and Nishimura, 2003). I believe these repeating/shadowing activities can really enforce the listening/speaking connection and could be effective if practiced consistently. Unfortunately, the intensive course was too short, and I was not able to evaluate the effectiveness of listening/repeating exercises this time.

Following the listening exercises, another cartoon, Cartoon 2, is presented as an introduction to a reading text. Cartoon 2 seems to be slightly more difficult than cartoon 1, but it does provide a good pre-reading exercise/discussion leading to the reading text, which immediately follows Cartoon 2. The reading texts are appropriate and meaningful materials for academic purposes both in their content and language level. As a result, reading materials are much more difficult than the materials presented in the listening exercises in the first part of the chapter, creating a jump in the level of difficulty between listening exercises and the reading activity, which is challenging for many students. In order to fill this gap, I used the accompanying CD and made use of the reading text for listening exercises. First, the students listened to the CD a couple of times without looking at the reading texts, took notes, and discussed the main points of the passage in pairs/groups. Then, the students were asked to read the texts and complete the comprehension questions. This listening-reading connection seemed to provide a smooth transaction from listening to reading as well as meaningful scaffolding for their reading comprehension. Additionally, the teacher’s manual provides Japanese translation of the reading materials, which was not necessary for my teaching purposes, but some Japanese teachers as well as some students may find the translations useful.

In the final section, “Think it Over”, a couple of discussion questions are listed. For example, in Chapter 1 (Body Language in *Peanuts* – nonverbal communication), the two questions listed are: “What body language makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?” and “Are there any gestures in Japanese culture that are considered taboo or rude?”. These questions are good discussion topics and can be used for speaking practices. It is also possible to use these topics as writing prompts even though they are somewhat too simplified to be appropriate for academic purposes. In the intensive course, I used these questions to make my students practice writing essays. The students were asked to write a thesis statement and to provide two or three supporting evidences/examples/details. The questions mentioned above were thus modified to the following:

“Are there any body language and gestures that make you feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Explain what they are and why/how they make you feel that way.”

“Are there any gestures in Japanese culture that are considered as taboo or rude? What are they? Why are they considered as taboo or rude?”

Even though I strongly believe that the incorporation of writing instructions and practices definitely strengthens students’ overall academic English ability, the questions listed in the book should not be considered as a weakness of the textbook because these questions are not intended to be used as writing prompts. The questions at the end of each chapter are adequate discussion questions, and instructors can easily modify the discussion questions or add new writing prompts to teach different academic essay organizations, such as argumentative, compare/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution.

Finally, the use of *Peanuts* comic strips is the most distinctive features of this textbook. Students start each lesson by reading a cartoon, which introduces the chapter topic and simultaneously provides intriguing warm-up activities. The students seem to find this approach generally fun and interesting. However, they did have difficulties understanding some of the cartoons. Not only did they find the cartoons culturally difficult to associate with, but also they were often not able to understand the jokes and humor presented in the cartoons. To the majority of the students, *Peanuts* depicted some famous American cartoon characters such as Snoopy and Charlie Brown, and it was difficult for them to have insights into the American cultural issues deeply embedded in *Peanuts*.

Content-based instruction may be considered a challenge for those of us who teach English in Japan. However, the benefits of CBI are well evidenced (e.g., Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989), and it is worthwhile applying this approach when possible, especially with more advanced English learners. This textbook has successfully adapted the CBI approach, and the content of the book includes both the important cultural issues as well as good language exercises. I especially recommend it for those teachers who do not have much CBI experience but would like to try this approach in their teaching career.

References:

- Brinton, D.M., Snow, M.A., and Wesche, M.B. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction*. New York : Newbury House.
- Shibata, V. (2004). *Hajimeteno wisupaaring doojitsuuyama [Beginner’s Simultaneous Interpretation by Whilspering]*. Tokyo: Nan’undo.
- Tamai, K., Someya, Y., Tanaka, M., Tsuruta, C., and Nishimura, T. (2003). Torigai, K. (Ed.). *Hajimete no shadooingu*. Tokyo: Gakken.

Yuri Kusuyama