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Tell me a story: developing and using an integrated skills unit of storytelling for foreign language learners

Different students do different things well. An integrated skills unit provides students with a variety of opportunities to experience success in the classroom. Assignments are designed to allow students to interact with information in a mixture of ways and contexts. Thus, students demonstrate their understanding of content through various medians, such as oral presentations, action research, creative writing, and artwork. As each student does something really well, the class becomes a community of mini-experts. We learn from one another. The entire learning experience, for both teachers and students, is enriched.

Integrated Skills Unit[1]

An integrated skills unit is one big unit with mini-units. The logical genesis for a storytelling unit is to begin with the oral traditions of storytelling. Students are exposed to ethnological research methods. They research local traditions, legends and folklore, along with family stories. From their research, students create a story to be told. As they are telling their story, they learn various techniques which verbally and visually enhance their stories and overall presentation skills. After the oral storytelling, students transfer their storytelling into creative writing assignments. Some of the benefits of integrating the skills are:

- Students *see* information in different ways
- Students *use* information in different ways
- Recycle target vocabulary
- Less is more

Intermediate English and student profile

The students I designed the storytelling unit for are second semester Japanese university freshman. The class is a one year Intermediate English course which focuses on developing four main skills in students: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. I introduced the storytelling unit in the second semester of this year long course. My reasons for choosing the second semester were twofold: 1) spring is our second semester and this season is a natural setting in which to pursue new and creative work; 2) the class could benefit from the previous semester's hard work of learning how trust themselves, trust each other and work together.

English is a required course starting in seventh grade for all Japanese students[2]. Even though these Japanese students have been studying English through formal education for an average of six years, I find that most of my students struggle to use English in creative ways. They are very good test takers. The Japanese system for evaluating English ability is often focused on the "correct" use of grammar and vocabulary. In order to succeed on these standardized tests, students must memorize volumes of information. Thus, much of their English instruction has not been tailored for the creative use of language. Even so, the good news for English teachers of Japanese university students is that the students do indeed have a lot of English in them; and so as a teacher one of my jobs is to get all this English out – out into the classroom to be heard and out on paper to be read.

In the beginning…

The oral traditions of storytelling are steeped in culture and rich in history. Culture and history breathe life into a story. A story is individual; it is tribal; it is regional; it is national; it is identity. It is the storyteller's country – the place where she or he comes from and calls home. And so this sense of place, with its culture and history, is preserved in every breath of the story.

As students research oral histories, they develop an awareness of individual culture and history. With this awareness, they begin to appreciate not only their own home and culture but also the differences among cultures, including the variety of traditions in which stories have been told.

When we began the oral storytelling, students often stuttered into awkward pauses as they told their stories. They would avoid eye contact with the audience and rarely used animated gestures. However the longer students spent researching and practicing their own oral stories, the less they asked, "Is this right?" They realized their individual experience was valid regardless of how different it was from their classmates'[3]. The students developed a sense of pride in their individual stories. Pride gave birth to confidence. By the end of the oral storytelling section of the

[1] Please see appendix 1 for lesson ideas and projects targeting specific skills.
[2] Some school systems begin English instruction in the primary grades. However, in the typical public school, English is introduced in seventh grade.
[3] During the early parts of the first semester, students often checked with each other to confirm that the work they were doing in class was "right". At that point, for them, "right" meant that everyone's work looked the same.

unit, most students were speaking smoothly and making eye contact with the audience. As one student observed, “There’s no wrong way to do it. Anything is okay”.

Poetry and the five senses

Before I have my students talk on paper, I have them talk out loud – to themselves, to each other and to me. After they have practiced talking out loud, we then move to communicating through the written word. I like to begin with poetry. Poetry is painting pictures with words. To say things without saying things is an art. Flannery O’Connor talks about developing and cultivating a “habit of art [by] looking at the created world and using the senses…to find as much meaning as possible in things” (101). As a class we began to search for meaning, and practiced how to express what we would *see* as meaningful through the five senses. Our search for meaning started in nature. Below is a template I used in the early stages of scaffolding student poems[4]. The second poem is a student variation of the nature themed template and the five senses.

Spring…
Spring comes _____
It looks like _____
And it sounds like _____
It smells like _____
Sometimes it tastes like _____
And I can touch (feel) _____

The Wind Blows…
The wind blows *as if my grandmother holds me*
It looks like *trees are waving*
And it sounds like *the voice of children*
It smells like *the scent of life*
Sometimes it tastes like a *cool mint*
And I can feel *the breath of nature*
The wind makes me feel like *I’m with a special person*

The grammar of poetry is as equally expressive as the artistic flavor of the words chosen. When students are writing poems, they are free to experiment with punctuation – they can forget, redefine and break all the rules they learned in formal essay writing. Such a pioneering spirit through words and punctuation allows students to close the grammar guidebook and enjoy the adventure of discovering and creating art[5].

Narratives

After the students have returned from their adventures in poetry, we then turn onto the well-trodden land of narratives. Much has been done in the creative spirit of writing narratives. Libraries are teeming with good stories and mass publication has made books easily accessible for more readers and writers. Yet even though volumes of stories have been written and heard, I encourage my students to express an original idea; to say something old in a new way; to put their fingerprint on paper through thoughtful words. Not everything worth reading has already been written.

Initially the task of creating a story - an entire story complete with introduction, plot, character development, climax and conclusion - is intimidating for young writers. Equally daunting is having to do all of that creating in a foreign language. Therefore, I have my students write their first drafts in Japanese. They think quicker in Japanese and they communicate better in Japanese. I don’t want their creativity diluted by frustrations with translations. After they have written their first drafts in Japanese, they share their story ideas, in English, with a partner. At this point they have created a solid idea for their story and are now ready to begin their second draft in English. Once they have completed their second draft they exchange drafts with a partner for peer-editing. Peer-editing teaches students thoughtful habits about examining work. Students learn to think and talk critically with each other, and they are better able to apply these analytical skills to their own work after editing each other’s work[6].

When they are ready, they have a writing conference with me. Different students are ready at different times. For the narratives, I give them an anticipated timeline of where they might want to be in their writing. The timeline is flexible but is an important cairn for plotting through their narration given the reality of bringing closure to assignments.

Because they had spent so much time working in pairs and thoughtfully reflecting on their own stories, most of the editing I did in our one-on-one conferences was related to formal grammar corrections. At this third stage of their drafts, the majority of students had created three-dimensional, tangible characters who were living, breathing, and acting through a well developed plot. Of course we would dialogue about certain aspects of their stories and the

[4] This template is not original with me. I found it on the internet but have not been able to relocate the site. I apologize for not being able to name the website or the author of the template.
[5] Please see appendix 2 for an example of a student poem written at the end of our poetry unit.
[6] Please see appendix 3 for possible questions to include on a peer-editing sheet.

possibility of additions/deletions for clarity issues, etc. But overall the narratives were well thought out and rich in detail. And, the students knew their work well. When they talked about their work, they were the experts and they spoke with confidence.

Revelations…

We are all storytellers. "[We] begin to hear and tell stories when [we're] a child, and there doesn't seem to be anything complicated about it" (O'Connor 88). Even though telling stories doesn't seem "complicated", at some point stories stop being told and people stop listening. To be a storyteller, you need an audience. It is important to not only teach students how to tell a meaningful story, but to also teach them how to thoughtfully listen to stories. When stories stop being told and heard, the irreplaceable gets lost – *we* lose *our* history.

Conclusion

At the end of the unit students reflected on their work. One of the questions I asked students in their storytelling reflections was, "What are you most proud of?" Many of the students' responses reflected the pride and confidence in how their own work had developed and improved. One student wrote, "I'm proud I could write a story. I didn't know I could do that." Another said, "I really like my pictures. I spent hours and hours drawing them. I think I did a good job creating my character. I'm proud of that." They also developed an appreciation for their classmates' work, as this student reflected, "Everyone's story is so good. It's really interesting. I want to hear everybody's story."

The integrated skills unit creates a place for every student to do something well. The successes that the individual student experiences contribute to the success of the whole class. Students learn to trust themselves and believe that their work is valuable. They also learn to respect the individuality of everyone else's work. The similarities and differences among the class are the fresh breath that everyone is breathing - we are all inhaling and we are exhaling because everyone is talking, and everyone is listening.

References

Forester, E.M. Aspects of the Novel. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1927.

Lopate, Phillip, ed. The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1994.

O'Connor, Flannery. Mystery and Manners. Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1957.

Appendix 1

Lesson ideas

- Oral Traditions/Folklore/Legends
- Fairy Tales/Myths
- Pictures/Comics/Characters

Possible projects

Listening

- Oral Storytelling
- Listening Map
- Artistic Reactions

Oral Presentations

- Telling stories in traditional form
- Telling stories in modern form
- Reenacting scenes from movies, plays, etc.

Reading

- Traditional Versions
- Modern Versions
- Cartoons/Comics

Research

- Family Stories
- Time Periods
- Historical Settings
- Cultural Contexts and Sociological Implications

Artwork

- Masks
- Character Illustrations
- Story Scenes

Writing

- Write an original story
- Re-write a traditional story in modern form
- Diary/Character Journal
- Holiday Cards – Valentine's Day, Tanabata
- Letters to a character
- Creating dialogue from comics

Appendix 2

"The Two Words"

"I'm sorry."
I don't need that
you didn't do any bad thing
and me neither

"I love you."
I don't need that
that's not the words for me
but someone else

"I'm happy."
I don't want that
I understand you're happy
but I'm not

"You don't have to do."
I don't want that
sure I didn't have to do
but I wanted, for you

words are just words
but words
your two words will melt
soon in the air
with my exhaustion

Appendix 3

Name: _____ Peer Editor:_____

Peer Editing

Please read your partner's story and respond thoughtfully to the following questions.

1. Does the introduction capture the reader's attention? Does the introduction include information which is necessary to the story?

2. Is the body of the story a well developed plot? Are the characters tangible? If the writer uses dialogue, does the dialogue enrich the story?

3. Does the ending impact the reader?

4. What is the thing you like most about this story?

5. Please offer one suggestion for improving this story.