

Interactive English Writing and Storytelling in an EFL Context

For Japanese University Students

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Abstract

Writing and storytelling are too often neglected in lower-level Japanese English foreign language (EFL) teaching/learning situations in favor of activities that focus purely on students' listening and speaking abilities. While listening and speaking are obviously essential skills in developing communicative competence in second language acquisition, there is great value in engaging lower-level EFL students to pursue writing tasks in a communicative context. Interactive writing and oral storytelling tasks have proven to effectively encourage lower-level Japanese university students to draw on their previous English language learning experience in order to develop more confidence in approaching post-secondary English language content and material. This paper attempts to focus on methods and approaches in implementing motivational writing and storytelling activities in Japanese university-level general English curriculums.

Introduction

One of the great challenges for many university-level English foreign language (EFL) teachers in Japan is generating a comfortable level of student interest and enthusiasm toward meaningful English language learning in the classroom. Teachers who instruct lower-level general English classes often remark in frustration about the futility of attempting to have their students focus on even the most basic grammatical principals necessary to successfully complete lesson target objectives. This is often despite the fact that most Japanese university students have already endured several years of English language instruction throughout their junior high school and high school academic years. Most Japanese university level English language learners are actually capable of more than their teachers sometimes realize. In fact, the majority of first-year Japanese university students tend to be reasonably familiar with a broad range of English vocabulary and grammar. The real challenge for university level EFL teachers is how to effectively elicit their students' accumulative English language knowledge and have their students produce it in a more functional capacity. Interactive writing and storytelling has proven to be one effective way of raising students' levels of awareness and attentiveness in their own language learning pursuits. By utilizing particular story genres that tap into students' interests, EFL teachers may find that they can indeed rejuvenate student enthusiasm into their classrooms. These activities can also play an influential role in

encouraging lower level students to approach English writing and composition in a more confident manner. This paper will outline some key strategies that were found to be most useful in implementing an interactive writing and storytelling unit within a Japanese university-level general English curriculum.

Background: Approach and Theory

The fact that many native EFL teachers in Japan who teach non-English majors avoid implementing writing activities into their communication classes is largely understandable. Writing has long been regarded as a solitary academic discipline that seems difficult to introduce to the large communication classes many university level EFL instructors manage. The Japanese educational system itself has continued to place more emphasis on English listening and speaking skills at the expense of developing students' basic writing skills. More troubling is the type of writing exercises that are usually common amongst most high school and college level students revolve around "one-sentence translation tasks" that emphasize the importance of grammatical accuracy over any creative or critical writing (Nakanishi, 2006: 2-3). The implication here is that there seems to be little regard for the notion that writing exercises may actually have a positive influence on a student's overall communicative ability.

There has been an interest within some EFL circles to consider writing and storytelling in a more communicative context. In such situations, writing and storytelling can be seen to provide the student with authentic language tasks that must be solved and evaluated interactively (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 1992). By adopting a more interactive approach to writing and storytelling with lower-motivated Japanese non-English majors, a variety of highly communicative classroom activities can lead up to the creation and presentation of short and yet authentic student-produced storytelling texts. Some of the more salient communicative features an interactive approach can offer are as follows:

- Warm-up activities: interviewing, brainstorming, listing, and/or ranking tasks to introduce story themes and genres.
- Vocabulary building: generating suitable vocabulary for story composition in a group setting.
- Group negotiation and support: writing and orally practicing syntactic structures in a group setting which were previously learned throughout junior high school and high school English classes.
- Collaborative writing: students work together to create short genre-based story texts.

- Presentation: student groups present their texts to the class (orally in more conventionally designed classrooms or using PowerPoint in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) rooms).
- Peer evaluations: student groups listen and evaluate their peers' texts.

Wachs (1993) has promoted interactive writing activities pointing to the fact that they "*work well because they orient students toward content, not language*" (75). The approaches and techniques outlined in this paper will attempt to illustrate how Japanese EFL students can be initially enticed by content and in turn become more familiar and confident with English language use and function in group settings. These approaches and techniques have been proven suitable to implement into a 3 to 4 lesson unit within a university general English curriculum. The purpose here is not to offer any definitive lesson plans, but rather to suggest some communicative strategies that have proven to be both effective and popular amongst lower level Japanese university non-English majors.

Selecting and Introducing Story Themes

The selection and introduction of suitable story themes and genres for Japanese university level EFL classes involves careful consideration. Interests will likely vary and factors such as age, gender and overall English language ability will influence the popularity of chosen themes. One storytelling genre that has proven to work well with most lower-level first-year Japanese university students, and is used as a model in this paper, is ghost stories. Having a rich tradition of ghost folklore, Japan offers a wealth of material for students to draw upon. Approaching such a story genre, students could initially be encouraged to discuss and become more familiar with the topic being introduced by answering a few simple warm-up questions on the blackboard:

- (1) Do you believe in ghosts?
- (2) Have you or any of your friends ever seen a ghost?
- (3) What is the scariest movie you have ever seen?

Students can then make an interview sheet (*Table 1*) using the warm-up questions chosen and interview a few students from different groups:

Inter-group interviews at this stage are encouraged largely to foster good relations and camaraderie throughout the entire class beyond the friendship group bubbles, which may already exist within initial group settings.

Names	Do you believe in ghosts?	Have you or any of your friends ever seen a ghost?	What is the scariest movie you have ever seen?
Naoki	Yes, he does	No	Ring
Aya	No, she doesn't	No	The Shining
Takeshi	Yes, he does.	Once, when he was camping.	The Blair Witch Project

Table 1: Warm-up Interview

Mixing around the class and sharing different views and opinions is also an effective way of introducing the type of communicative task-based activities that students will be engaged in throughout the project-based unit. Writing on the importance of tasks in the second language (L2) classroom environment, Richards and Rogers (2001) comment that "*tasks are believed to foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning.*" (228). While engaged in their task, students are expected to negotiate meaning communicatively with the covert aim of improving their fluency. As students return to their original groups, teachers can then initiate feedback where interview questions are modeled and students are chosen or encouraged to voluntarily answer. In Japanese university classrooms, where the students are often unwilling to speak up voluntarily, teachers can encourage responses through hand raising gestures: (e.g. How many people believe in ghosts? Hand raise = I do).

Student groups can subsequently be assigned a quick listing activity to generate some ideas that may later be used for short story writing. The students can be asked to make a list of some haunted places they know around their local environment. Realistically, students will often negotiate this largely in their native (L1) language. For this reason, it is sometimes useful to have students try to offer simple reasons or explanations in English for the conditions surrounding list choices: (e.g. "The Minami-Ku cemetery-because my friend saw a ghost there"). Teachers can assign each group a listing task of five haunted places and have each group write one place on the blackboard with a corresponding explanation to ensure that all groups have a range of ideas to choose from.

Negotiating Vocabulary and Grammatical Structures

Reviewing and reinforcing the basic English grammar and sentence structure relevant to the storytelling target exercise is also necessary. Although English proficiency levels will vary within even the lowest streams of non-English major university level communication classes,

students should collectively be able to recall basic grammatical concepts that they have previously studied throughout their junior high school and high school years. The standardized Japanese *mombusho* (Ministry of Education) guidelines for English material to be covered on university entrance tests assume a reasonable level of shared general English knowledge amongst most first-year university students. The main problem is the manner in which these students have likely been trained to approach English grammar. Most of these students would have studied through some type of conventional English textbook focusing on core grammatical structures that are "*very often presented out of context*" (Nunan, 1998: 192). In Japan, students become accustomed to endlessly disconnected grammar exercises revolving around "fill in the blank" style exercises to mundane sentence translations. These exercises are often devoid of any practical and functional relevance and as a result make English language acquisition a doubly mystifying and frustrating experience. Students need to actively experience how grammar is applied in accomplishing specific tasks with tangible objectives in order to understand its importance in terms of function.

Motivating lower-level Japanese university non-English majors to reconsider basic English grammar is not an easy task for an EFL teacher. Most teachers in this situation will be faced with a largely disinterested mass of students who have already been jaded through their past attempts at English language learning and who will not be receptive to grammatical explanations of any kind. By having students work interactively on exercises designed to generate vocabulary for meaningful task objectives, students can have an opportunity to actually work with English as oppose to studying it as an isolated concept. One interesting finding in Cohen and Apeh's (1981) study on second language learning was that a connection seemed to exist between language learner's level of proficiency and the type of task that was most suitable for vocabulary acquisition. It was found that listing exercises involving vocabulary worked best for lower level language learners. In terms of storytelling amongst lower level Japanese English language learners, listing has proven to be very effective when students are asked to relate vocabulary items to specific functions within a story.

In the example below (*Table 2*), student groups were shown a variety of pictures from old horror movies and asked to identify and write down relevant vocabulary from each picture. They were also instructed to write both the present and past forms of any verbs they could identify.

Verbs (action words)	Adjectives (words that tell us information about nouns)	Nouns (people, place or thing words)
present-past	white	ghost
see-saw	old	house
walk-walked	black	crow/raven
scream-screamed		

Table 2: Vocabulary Chart

Once enough vocabulary had been generated from the students, the class could orally practice using narrative structures (simple past and past progressive tense mixing) as modeled by the teacher:

"We saw a white ghost as we were walking up to the old house."

After a few "listen and repeat" style exchanges, the students were able to practice on their own within their groups. In this case, the teacher went from group to group, monitoring student attempts and offering constructive feedback.

Collaborative Writing: Working With Storyboard Templates

Sentence constructing exercises should enable students to become more confident manipulating verb forms and applying what they have practiced to creating slightly longer texts. Teachers can support lower-level students here by creating short storyboard templates where students have to collaboratively find suitable vocabulary to complete the story. *Figure 1* shows an example of a storyboard template that was used by one group of Japanese first-year university non-English majors:

GHOST STORY

It was a (1) _____ (2) _____ night in Sapporo.
 (3) _____ and I were (4) _____ through Nakajima
 park when we heard a (5) _____ scream! We were
 very scared. I looked around and saw a (6) _____ light
 coming towards us. We started to (7) _____ as fast as we
 could. The ghost was getting closer. I fell! (3) _____
 grabbed my (8) _____ and pulled me up. The ghost was
 now standing next to us. (3) _____ screamed! Suddenly, I
 noticed that it was only (9) _____. (3) _____ and
 I were relieved. We decided to go to (10) _____ to relax
 and have some (11) _____.

1. Adjective (e.g. cold, black, dark) _____
2. Adjective (e.g. cold, black, dark) _____
3. Friend's name _____
4. "ing" verb (e.g. running, dancing) _____
5. Adjective (e.g. cold, black, dark) _____
6. Adjective (e.g. cold, black, dark) _____
7. Verb (e.g. run dance) _____
8. Body part noun (e.g. hand, leg) _____
9. Teacher, friend or local talent name _____
10. Restaurant name _____
11. Food or drink name _____

Figure 1. Storyboard Template

Student groups, in this situation, were left to brainstorm and select appropriate vocabulary to fill in their stories. Once the groups were finished, individual group members were encouraged to mingle amongst other group members from different groups and exchange story ideas and vocabulary. At this point, there was a high level of communicative interaction as students orally read their stories to one another. After a sufficient amount of oral practice was achieved, the proverbial scaffold could be dismantled further and student groups were given the assignment of creating their own original short storyboard texts.

Presentation

In terms of presentation, teachers may wish to save a class for students to both practice and then share their stories with the whole class. In classrooms offering traditional resources, students can prepare poster presentations or can even act their stories out to the class. Teachers who have access to CALL rooms can also have their students prepare short PowerPoint presentations with embedded sound recordings. This approach has proven very effective in larger classes where students work in smaller groups or pairs. Students can then present their projects to the class through a central projector/monitor. Both modes of presentation add a useful listening comprehension aspect to the unit where students can peer evaluate each of their classmates' presentations.

Peer Evaluations

Providing positive feedback at the end of an interactive writing and storytelling unit is essential in building student confidence. Peer evaluations can prove to be highly interactive activities as group members are expected to negotiate amongst themselves and agree to assign other groups a score for their efforts. Peer reviewing in this context also often inspires students to invest more time and quality on their work since they know their text will likely have a live audience. Drafting evaluative criteria for story presentations can be left for individual teachers to decide depending on their needs and expectations within their own teaching/learning context. The example below (*Figure 2*) was used in a situation where a teacher decided to spend time going over basic story elements with students in order to make the listening task during the presentation stage more challenging.

PEER EVALUATION SHEET					
GROUP NAME:	_____				
GHOST STORY TITLE:	_____				
CHARACTER NAMES:	_____				
STORY OUTLINE:					
SETTING	_____				
BEGINNING	_____				
RISING ACTION	_____				
CLIMAX	_____				
RESOLUTION	_____				
ENGLISH	1	2	3	4	5
VOLUME	1	2	3	4	5
PPT	1	2	3	4	5 (OPTIONAL: ADD POSTER)
INTERESTING/ ORIGINAL STORY	1	2	3	4	5
TOTAL:	/20				

Figure 2. Peer Evaluation Sheet (for students)

The clearer the evaluative criteria, the more seriously the students are likely to take their evaluative task at the end of the unit. It is important to consider that many Japanese college and university students may not be overly familiar or comfortable with this style of evaluation at first. Time is needed to go over the criteria and perhaps even provide students with a practice model. The value of being able to share ideas and constructive criticism will inevitably benefit students who do decide to take a more active role in their own learning.

Conclusion

Many university-level English instructors may not have the luxury to maneuver far from their set department curriculum guidelines and may indeed find it difficult to implement a complete project-based writing and storytelling unit into their syllabus. The hope of this paper was to bring attention to the potential merits and benefits of adopting a more interactive approach to a skill that is often considered to be solitary and non-communicative. The activities outlined above have recently proven to be popular amongst lower-level Japanese university English language learners who traditionally lack motivation in approaching a required subject outside

of their major. Through developing and refining techniques in approaching a skill that is often reserved for intermediate to high level English language learners, writing and storytelling have the potential to reach a wider student audience.

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