

Between the Keys

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Creating an Interactive Movie Review Folder

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Movies are immensely popular, especially among college-age students. Many see movies as their principal hobby. Moreover, movies are high on the list of reasons for studying English. For many, this is the final standard of fluency: to enjoy a Hollywood film without the need of subtitles. Movies also shape Japanese students' perceptions (and stereotypes) of what it's like to live in the West and the values that Westerners have. Students have a desire to learn more about and share their favorite stories. While watching movies in English is still too challenging for most EFL students, writing movie reviews is an excellent way to put their deep interest to academic purposes.

Having students write movie reviews serves several purposes. It gives students the chance to use English with a medium they love. It encourages students to look at a particular movie (and hence movies in general) more critically, perhaps leading to a deeper understanding of the story and their reaction to it. It gives students a chance to use their writing for an audience beyond the classroom. Finally, it provides readers with a reference and critique to decide which movies to watch.

This project was completed using the many movies available at my college's Media Center. This collection is an excellent educational resource, giving students easy access to quality entertainment. Having such a collection, however, is not essential to this project.

Procedure

1. We began by brainstorming all the

movies we could remember, writing the titles on the blackboard. This made students eager to watch popular movies they hadn't seen and reminded them of their favorites.

2. The class discussed types of movies—action, comedy, romance, sci-fi, etc.—and tried to decide how to categorize the movies we listed on the board.

3. A simplified movie review was provided with appropriate vocabulary such as “acting,” “special effects,” “sound track,” etc. Also, adjectives that can be used to evaluate and describe movies (so-so, a bomb, boring, funny, scary, etc.) were provided and defined.

4. I showed a 10-15 minute clip from the movie *The Fisher King*. A homeless man is contemplating suicide when two local ruffians beat him up. Just then the Fisher King (Robin Williams) comes to the rescue, sounding and looking like he just stepped off a Shakespearean stage. He and his band of homeless save the suicidal man. Students use the vocabulary (above) to (a) describe what happened in the clip, (b) imagine what might happen later, and (c) do a short review of the clip.

5. Students chose a movie from the school's video library (or possibly from a local video store) that they wanted to do a review about. A previously-watched movie is fine, but in this case they were advised to watch it again. Students were encouraged to choose a movie that is not too difficult to describe and review. Also, students informed me about the movie beforehand so I could make sure they all

did different movies (and that they had begun thinking about the assignment).

6. Students watched their movies and wrote about it in two parts. For the first part, students described what happened in the movie. Certain storytelling words such as “first,” “next,” “then,” and “finally,” were taught. For this, students were made aware to take great pains to not give away any surprises and to not write about the ending. In this way they became aware of audience: readers would likely be considering whether or not to watch the movie. We went through the usual process of writing, revision, conferencing, and more revision before settling on a finished product.

For the second part, students wrote a short review and gave one to five stars for various aspects, such as acting, sound

Other classes were encouraged to read the reviews and/or write their opinions about various movies. Future classes will add to the folder.

Conclusion

This project took two full 90-minute class periods and three partials (30-40 minutes). Evaluation focused on students’ descriptions of what happened in the movie. This was the most challenging aspect and perhaps the most useful for their development as writers. Since the reviews have ongoing usefulness, appearance also mattered considerably. In almost every case the title pages were well done, reflecting the students’ interest in the project. After a full semester in a binder in the Media Center, this semester

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track, etc.

7. Using old movie magazines, or sketches, students prepared a title page for their movie reviews. The last page of each movie’s review was blank for others to share their comments about the movie and whether they agreed or disagreed with the review. If handwritten, it is best to provide students with the same type of paper. Likewise, standardizing the format for ratings, comments, and titles for sections lends the overall project professionalism.

8. Upon completion, the reviews are exchanged so students could write comments and appreciate each other’s work. All reviews were then indexed and put together in a folder in the Media Center.

I put the reviews up on the bulletin board in my classroom. It was satisfying to see how often students read and scanned the reviews. A special effort will be needed, however, to motivate students who scan to write their own comments on the comment page.

This project ultimately goes beyond simply having students’ work displayed; it becomes part of the community for enjoyment reading and commenting on different movies.

Editor’s Note: This article previously appeared in the CUE SIG newsletter. Reprints are available from Eamon McAfferty at: <eamon@gol.com>. The author can be reached at: <small@nagasaki-gaigo.ac.jp>. **IBK**

Using Books Which Emphasize Questions Over Dialogues

Daniel Droukis, JALT MW SIG

The world of book publishing must be a place with a great deal of decision making. The world of the language teacher who is looking for the appropriate textbook is also one where careful consideration is given to the textbook. If one is fortunate enough to be in a situation where the classes are small and the textbook chosen is working well, then perhaps there won't be that many problems. What happens when you need to teach some kind of communication class and the size limits the usefulness of using the strictly conversational textbook? Perhaps you may want to choose a book with no set dialogues to guide the students, but a book which allows the student to communicate with others through topics and questions the students must use to communicate with others and also to express their own opinions.

Relying on experiences with a variety of books, a teacher will usually be able to determine what kind of book suits the needs of both s/he and the students. One type of book that can be found in the catalogues of publishers is that which contains questions (usually multiple choice) as a main component of a unit. Colleagues have been critical of these books, explaining that they are not exactly certain how comfortable they are with the concept.

One book, which I personally find successful, is *Face to Face* by Fuller and Fuller and published by Macmillan. The book contains units without introductory dialogues, but instead offers a collection

of multiple-choice questions for the students to answer. This approach is easier for the less-experienced students to work with because it allows them to focus on one question at a time rather than the more intimidating long paragraph or complex dialogue.

Advantages of this type of book

The books of this type can be much easier to deal with in a variety of teaching situations. They can be effective in large classes where books containing dialogues may be difficult to manage. The use of the question format allows the teacher to let the students circulate around the room, talking to and gathering information from many students. This can allow the teacher to circulate and give the students the opportunity to ask questions of the teacher when they may be more hesitant if the others can clearly hear what is being asked.

Students who are uncomfortable or unmotivated to learn English will be easier to encourage because they will feel less pressure from other members of the group. In this instance, general English courses, which are required of almost any university or junior college student, can be more interesting and less frustrating for the students. This, in turn, will make the classes easier for the teacher to teach.

Vocabulary is introduced in the book with definitions in easy English allowing the student to find the meanings of difficult words without spending a lot of time using

the dictionary. For the teacher, having the words defined in the book means that s/he will spend less time explaining what individual words mean and spend more time communicating with students as they try to work with the textbook.

Having a good textbook to use for university classes will make tasks easier for the teacher. "Good textbooks often contain lively and interesting materials; they provide a sensible progression of language items, clearly showing what has to be learnt and in some cases summarizing what has been studied so that students

my experiences in high school
my taste in fashion and my lifestyle
(another answer)

This type of activity allows the students to give information about themselves by quietly choosing an answer in the book and then, by working with others, ask questions to get responses from partners on the same question. Directions in the book rarely call for the students to interact with others, but it is organized in such a way as to make it easy for them to do so. This interaction between classmates allows the students to move

This type of book may often be the kind of book that can be beneficial to the students by getting them to communicate with others in a more real situation.

can revise grammatical and functional points they have been concentrating on. Textbooks can be systematic about the amount of vocabulary presented to the student and allow the students to study on their own outside of class. Good textbooks relieve the teacher from the pressure of having to think of original material for every class." (Harmer in Richards, 1993)

Do Harmer's views on the good textbook apply to this type of book? Firstly, the materials should be lively and interesting. If a textbook is lively then it must be structured so that the students can be active rather than passive when using the book. Each unit begins with the student completing answers to incomplete sentences. For example:

The most interesting thing about me is _____.

my hobbies and interests

my plans for the future

places I've traveled to

about the classroom and communicate with others. This makes for a livelier atmosphere. However, the teacher will need to be actively observing the students to be certain that they are doing the activity as instructed.

Vocabulary

Another section of a unit is a vocabulary list of words with English-only definitions. These words have been found in the previous question exercise. This section requires the teacher to add a bit more to the lesson. A written exercise with cloze passages including the vocabulary words helps the students to better understand how the word is used in context. This will require the teacher to add material to the book, which s/he may or may not be willing to do. However, the extra investment in time gives the students the extra material needed in order to understand the proper usage

of the terms.

Interview Questions

Interview questions also play a key role in the use of this book. Students are often unable or unwilling to develop questions to ask others in classroom activities. Since asking questions generates communication it seems essential that the students be involved with asking and answering questions. This is another way for them to develop speaking, listening and writing skills through this type of activity. Some students are able to write up good sentence answers. Others have difficulty and are only able to give simple phrases or one-word answers. But they are all communicating and processing information, especially if they are using these questions to gain information from others. As Harmer emphasized, the textbook must have systematic vocabulary. The use of interview questions related to the topic allows the students to focus on a group of vocabulary words contained in the particular unit and is thus not overwhelming.

Let's Talk

This activity is similar to "find someone who", where the students have a list of information which they need to find out from a partner. In the unit on summer vacation, there are a variety of questions, which can be in small groups. Again, there are a variety of questions or simple phrases which the student must use to gain information from their partners or fellow group members. This activity also allows the students to communicate with the teacher. The more traditional conversation textbook often seems to be geared toward student-student communication with little need for student-

teacher communication. These types of questions where the answers are more open-ended allow, and sometimes even require the students to communicate with the teacher. The problem with this type of activity is that it may require the students to depend on a dictionary so much that little time is spent on doing the actual activities.

Reading

The next activity that the students encounter is a reading passage. This is followed by very few true/false questions. Since there are so few true/false questions the teacher must supplement the list. In my own classes I have already prepared such lists thus making use in future classes much easier.

Listening Activity

This activity is much like that of other textbooks. It usually contains some kind of form which must be completed by the students after listening to a conversation. This is the only time the textbook actually uses any kind of conversation for the students to follow. With the exception of this activity and the reading the students are almost always allowed to interject their own ideas or comments into the activities.

Evaluation

Each unit is concluded with a page where the students can write about the topic they have just studied again from a personal point of view. If the topic was travel, then they may be asked to write about, "A Trip I'll Never Forget." This activity brings all the vocabulary and responses into use as the students again personalize the textbook and apply it to

Write for Japanese Students

Graham Bathgate and Allan Murphy

We often hear other teachers say: “That’s fine for small classes with only 19 students. What about big classes of 40 to 50 students?”

We would like to share some materials we have found to be very successful with small groups, and venture to say would be as successful with larger groups. The trick is to give up trying to look after everyone with pairwork materials like this—it is essential to ensure somehow that all the students try to speak English, although there’s a case for lower levels using some Japanese if they wish.

Needs and interests of your students

These materials have grown out of careful experiment and redrafting over five years—we are still writing. New ideas come up every week, arising out of the needs and interests of the students. That is one of the most important points about such materials: finding out about the needs of your students and what they are interested in.

The first example is from “Icebreakers” (See Fig. 1). Note that they are designed for pairwork so that each student has to listen carefully to the question and answer it as if having a conversation. As and when

necessary the teacher can get students to continue the conversation with “How about you?” and repeat the question.

Note how many references to students’ interests and background experience there are. We have found that students really warm to this kind of thing and want to use them. This can be an introductory getting-to-know you lesson in itself. The teacher can join in and make sure that some students receive his/her information. It is essential that the students make notes of the information they receive. They can use the notes to report later and/or write up on several students for homework. They could be asked to write their own questions. Students are better at materials creation than we think they are!

High expectations

The second point about writing for Japanese students is to assume that your students have their own ideas and are willing to express them—then it’s up to you to make sure that the conditions are right. Having these high expectations of the students has surprised us many times. Asking students for their opinions on various issues or current affairs in Japan at the moment usually brings up some interesting ideas. You can focus

Fig. 1 Icebreakers

Student A

1. Where do you live?
3. What time did you go to bed last night?
5. Please tell me about your favourite place in Japan.

Student B

2. What magazines do you like to read?
4. Do you prefer baseball or the J-League?
6. Please tell me about part-time jobs you’ve done.

their attention on the issues by giving them a worksheet with a variety of topics they can choose from: corporal punishment, fashion, part-time work, mobile phones, pachinko, political scandals, bullying, divorce rate, high costs of education, etc. The main thing is to give a choice of items that they are interested in. It could be set for homework beforehand; they could be given 5 minutes to make notes in class; they could share in threes or fours on the same topic to come up with 3 or 4 points to say on a topic, then pair off with others who have the same topic or a different one. There are many possibilities. Writing this kind of thing is fairly straightforward and very effective.

Grammar focus

The third point we would like to make is if some item of grammar is the focus, you can deal with one or more exercises in a class activity. We have found it works best if you start them off gradually on something like personal questions

(see “Icebreakers” above, for example) coupled with Preferences (Do you prefer a bath to a shower? A Japanese breakfast or a Western one? Beer to wine? etc.).

After that you can try more difficult ones. Try giving half your students question sheets of Frequency questions (See Fig. 2) and giving the other half questions relating to the use of Have you ever? (See Fig. 3). This way it is more interesting; it covers more grammar; it keeps the students thinking; and they hear and use the grammar points often.

High input

That brings us to the fourth point—high input. Having lots of information is important. Getting the students to read a lot is a good thing. How to help them share that information is another thing. We have had success with short articles and worksheets (See Fig. 4). Of course this would be for Intermediate level classes and above (550 on TOEFL). The thing is to have two articles: one for half the class, the other for the

Fig. 2 Frequency questions

Student A

How often do you

1. Drink coffee?
3. Eat sushi in a month?
5. Go to the hair salon in a year?
7. Listen to music in a week?

Student B

How often do you

2. Read a newspaper?
4. Watch movies in a month?
6. Use e-mail in a day?
8. Do you use an English/English dictionary?

Fig. 3 Have you ever ?

Student A

Have you ever

1. Been to a fortune teller?
3. Slept in a tent?
5. Made a cake?
7. Eaten fugu ?

Student B

Have you ever

2. Lost your wallet?
4. Won a prize for anything?
6. Swum in the sea?
8. Written a letter to a newspaper?

Fig. 4: Article worksheet

1. Write the title of the article.
2. Write what the article is about in no more than three short sentences.
3. What are the main points of the article?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)
4. What did you think of this issue?
5. What did you know about this topic before?
6. What other topics can you think of related to this story?
 - a)
 - b)

other half. All the students must fill in the worksheets to be able to share information more easily. You can write your own articles centred round students' interests or write simplified versions of newspaper articles. This takes time, of course, but it's amazing how effective a more accessible article can be, rather than having students struggle through excess verbiage. The point is to use the information as a springboard for discussion using the students' own views. The worksheet, if filled out well, will give most students something to speak more easily from.

Lots of questions

Another excellent way to help your students communicate more is to provide them with lots of questions on a

topic they are interested in. This menu approach ensures that they feel they are able to make the choice of question—some students like to ask more difficult questions, some like easy ones. The main thing is that it will be the questions they are interested in, the questions they think will generate some conversation.

The question types should be varied to encourage thinking about the form and the answers—anyway, it is more natural to ask different questions. You can put half the questions on one sheet for Student A and the others on sheet B. This kind of list is very easily added to. It is fun to write your own materials like this, and it is remarkably simple, especially when you start to key into what your students like to talk about.

Fig. 5 Lots of questions

Topic: Domestic travel

- Have you ever stayed in a minshuku?
- When was the last time you used the Shinkansen?
- Have you been to Sapporo?
- What kinds of omiyage do you like to buy?
- Do you write postcards to your friends?
- How often do you stay overnight somewhere?
- Where would you like to visit in Japan?

Awareness of language

We love encouraging our students to think about their learning. We are constantly surprised how easily they take to this—Japanese students are encouraged from early in their school life to write diaries and generally do all sorts of things to help them see what they are doing. We should be able to use this and encourage them to continue it.

One way is to give them lots of questions to ask each other and discuss their English learning.

Here are a few examples:

How long have you been studying English?

Why are you learning English?

What do you like about English?

What skills do you want to improve?

What do you think is the best way to learn English?

How many dictionaries do you have?

Where do you study?

Conclusion

The possibilities are endless in this kind of simple writing for Japanese students. The main thing is to start doing it, to mix your materials with the course book and keep a record of what works and what wasn't so useful. **IK**

Questions continued from page 6

their own lives. This concluding section is the one time where the students are not faced with questions. It allows them to freely respond to what they have just encountered and gives the teacher a chance to read a more lengthy expression of the students' views on the topic. It may be slightly inconsistent with the other activities in that it requires much more lengthy response.

Conclusion

A good textbook is not easily defined. Harmer's ideas on the good textbook help us to understand whether this textbook may be useful or just another one to put on our shelves. We may always have times where we have large classes for which a strictly conversation book may not be appropriate. It may also be the case that the typical reading, questions and cloze passage books so often found in college classrooms may not be quite appropriate. This type of book (not necessarily this particular book) may often be the kind

of book that can be beneficial to the students by getting them to communicate with others in a more real situation. It may be beneficial for the teacher because s/he will be better able to observe the students in action and be in a better position to assist when necessary. Therefore, when we are teaching those larger classes of students who are non-English majors we may want to consider that they will still be able to benefit from a book that allows them to communicate through learning to ask questions of one another rather than learning through examples of dialogues.

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From the Desk of . . . the Chair

Jim Swan, Materials Writers SIG Chair

Greetings fellow materials writers!

It will probably be early October by the time this issue of *Between the Keys* reaches you. I trust that you all had a relaxing summer and are now back on the job.

This issue brings you three articles written by fellow SIG members: Graham Bathgate and Allan Murphy give us their take on writing for Japanese students; Daniel Droukis makes a case for textbook selection based on the criterion of question-asking as opposed to dialog-presentation; and John Small outlines how to use movie reviews to motivate students to use English for real purposes. I hope you'll find something of interest in each of them. My thanks to these members for sharing their ideas with us.

Only about two months remain before JALT 2001. We will do our best to get another newsletter out before the conference, to publicize all MW conference events. I'd like to encourage all of you who are doing MW-related presentations to let me know, so that we can include our members' presentations as well. (**NOTE: those of you who responded to this request in the last newsletter—please send the information again. Your data was lost in the Great Computer Crash of August.**) I also welcome more articles from every-

body on any aspect of materials writing.

To produce a mid-November newsletter, we will need all materials in hand by late October—shall we say the 25th? Please remember, folks, a regular newsletter can not happen without your active contributions.

Also, don't forget to prepare your contribution to this year's "My Share—Live!" materials swap-meet. Walk in with 50 copies of your best lesson plan and walk out with a copy of everybody else's. We may have to modify the usual admission procedures this year to allow our pan-Asian colleagues easier access, but don't forget to prepare something extra special to knock their socks off.

Before I close this column, I must report with regret that at the beginning of the summer YahooGroups deactivated our LTWriters e-mail chat-list for inactivity. Perhaps this was an idea whose time has not yet come, but a very special "thanks anyway" to Sherri Leibert for her work in setting the list up and for presiding over its demise as its first-and-final list manager.

Wishing you all a pleasant fall semester and looking forward to seeing you all in Kita-Kyushu this November.

Jim <swan@daibutsu.nara-u.ac.jp> BK

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