



ESL MiniConference

The Magic of Stories With Regards to Mario Rinvoluceri

Summer
2007

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About half a year ago, Mario Rinvoluceri was a guest participant on one of the ChinaTEFLTeach discussion yahoo groups which I am a member of. The discussion with him was quite boisterous, and his irreverent questions sparked some funny responses from group members, even a reprimand from the moderator, who insisted that Rinvoluceri stay on the topic of teaching and not stray into culture. I enjoyed the exchanges with the famous Rinvoluceri, author of those game books for ESL and founder of the Humanising Language Teaching newsletter (www.hltmag.co.uk). I want to thank Mario Rinvoluceri and Hania Kryszewska (editor of HLT) for inspiring me to write the following article about something I experienced in Japan many years ago. I appreciate their encouragement.

The year was 1988. My family and I were excited about the upcoming move to Nakajo, Japan, where I was going to be part of the start-up team at what would turn out to be a 17-year run for Southern Illinois University-Carbondale's Niigata branch campus project--the longest lasting of any of the 50+ American branch campuses in Japan, except for the renowned Temple University-Tokyo.

I had some ideas for things I wanted to try with Japanese students. I didn't really know what to expect, but I had received some advice from a Chinese student in Kansas, who had warned me "not to blame" young people in Japan if they were quiet or hesitant to participate in class. That is how they are trained in school, this person suggested to me. "You need to teach them how to participate."

Nakajo is a wonderful little fishing village about 30 minutes by bicycle from the coast of the Sea of Japan, in Niigata prefecture. I made some interesting mistakes as a newcomer. For example, when I was invited to the home of my landlord's family for dinner one evening, they offered me a bath as soon as I walked in the door. "No thanks," I said. "I took one earlier today."

On several future occasions when invited to people's homes, I was wise enough to accept the offer of a bath, and found that the experience of eating a delicious meal of Japanese food is enhanced further by sitting for 15 or 20 minutes in near boiling water in a deep tub. Cold Japanese beer

is also a taste delight following one of these hot baths.

There was a little garden off to the side, out a sliding door, next to the house that was rented to my family that year in Nakajo. One of the first vocabulary words I learned was "bonsai tree," as there were several in that place. I loved that garden and the way in which different seasons brought out unique aspects: my favorite was the way the garden looked after a new snowfall in the wintertime.



But it was the month of May when I arrived, and within several days I was standing in front of new students at the temporary mobile units we were using for classrooms that first year at SIUC-Niigata. One of my classes was beginning level reading, and I do mean "beginning" level. My students were not familiar with the sounds of English, and I was guessing that their experience with written English was limited, too, and that their high school English lessons must have been conducted in a grammar-translation format.

The textbook for the reading class was the original "True Stories," and I thought the students needed some additional reading activities to help them transition into this text. I had brought a number of books with me to Japan, and two in particular were helpful during those first days, weeks, and months in Nakajo: "Developing Reading Skills: A Practical Guide to Reading Comprehension Exercises," by Francoise Grellet (Cambridge University Press, 1981) and "Relevance: Communication and Cognition," by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (Harvard University Press, 1986).

Grellet suggests that reading consists primarily of making hypotheses regarding what a text is about, and then reading a ways into the text in order to check your hypotheses, and refine them. "What one brings to the text is often more important than what one finds in it," she writes. "This is why...the students should be taught to use what they know to understand unknown elements, whether these are ideas or simple words." Grellet also says that it makes sense to categorize exercises, or activities, by levels of difficulty, because it is not the text, but what is to be done with it, that can be accurately described as easy or difficult.

The Sperber and Wilson book is interesting in that it works out many of the factors involved in determining what constitutes a relevant next statement or sentence in communication. Their work expands on the relevance principle in H.P. Grice's landmark "Logic and

Conversation" (1975), and Grice, in turn, derives from Searle, who learned from Austin, who is a direct intellectual descendant of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose earthshaking proposal was that meanings of words primarily consist in their contexts, or the others words around them.

I wanted my beginning students to experience what Grellet refers to as "global understanding" right from the start, on day one, by supporting their understanding with familiar items from the local setting we were in. I began the first day by presenting a short introduction to a story. I think the first story I gave them lasted just three or four days, and was a simplified version of Kafka's "Metamorphosis." But I was quickly learning about the Nakajo environment, and switched next to a new, completely original storyline, called "The Magic Bonsai Tree," in which I introduced a main character named Hitachi and a vague legend about a giant bonsai tree in the Nakajo cemetery. Clearly, I did not understand that bonsai are manicured to be miniatures, but the local landmarks did seem to catch the attention of the students.

Every day, as Hitachi walked to SIU-C at Nakajo with his classmates, they talked about a gigantic bonsai tree in the cemetery near their path. None of them had ever seen the tree up close, but they knew that it was supposed to be magic. The people of Nakajo said that if you ate the leaves of this magic tree the river monsters would creep into your home at night and raid your refrigerator. Hitachi proudly boasted to his friends, "That story does not scare me."

By this time, I had established a routine which took us about 15 or 20 minutes each class period, as I introduced the next installment of the story and led students through a series of exercises focused on the meaning of that day's episode.

First, students would see up on the board the full text of the previous day's episode, which they had only listened to the day before. We would go over this, and I would help them by acting out any vocabulary words they wanted to focus on.

Second, I would read aloud to them the new episode, and ask the students, on a sheet of paper, to draw a picture based on what they had just heard.

I gave students several minutes to do this and, as the days went by, I encouraged them to feel very free to be creative, imaginative, and not necessarily bound by any details of what they had heard in the first listening to the new episode.

Third, I would read the new episode aloud again, and the students were supposed to write two or three questions about what they had just heard. As days and weeks went by, I would often remind students that asking a question is the beginning of understanding.

Fourth, I would read the episode aloud a third and final time, and students were then given four or five minutes to write their own original ideas for what would happen next in the story. This final step gets at Grellet's suggestion that reading comprehension is primarily a series of guesses about what is coming next.

I took these papers up, and here is how I would respond before handing them back at the start of the next day's class. First, I always wrote positive comments below or next to their drawings, specifying parts that I could identify and, if I had no idea what the drawing represented, I still wrote something positive about the effort.

I very carefully corrected their questions for grammar and word choice, because I thought it was important to give them special feedback to help them formulate questions appropriately, these being such potentially useful tools in the learning and language learning experience.

I commented with specificity and encouragement on any ideas students gave for what would happen next in the story, and I tried to incorporate as many of their ideas as possible as I created the new episode each day.

The "Magic Bonsai Tree" story took some surprising twists and turns, especially after a fellow teacher, Daniel Castelaz (today an art teacher at Taipei American School), became interested and started introducing his students to the same storyline. Eventually Dan and I, and our students, had created two separate endings, and, for a gran finale, he visited my class and I, his, to share the alternate versions.

I did this activity several times again at the SIUC-Niigata program, and shared some of the stories at a presentation I made at Niigata JALT in January of 1989. With more advanced students, I presented Edgar Allan Poe stories, "The Tell Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado," in episodic fashion, with similar daily activities. I also used these activities in a listening laboratory class at SIUC-Niigata.

The Japanese have their own "Edgar Allan Poe," whose original Western name was Lafcadio Hearn. This writer fell in love with Japan's culture and traditions, and lived most of his adult life there. In his stories, and in some English retellings of traditional Japanese tales, spirits are treated as ordinary elements of everyday life. I was very lucky to hit upon the idea

of magic and mystery in developing that first story of mine in Nakajo. I believe the existence of these elements in Japanese traditions made the content of my stories more accessible despite new vocabulary and syntax.

I am always heartened by reports from ESL/EFL teachers of ways in which they have tapped the power of stories and literature as vehicles for language learning. And it is exciting for me whenever I find new stories or, better yet, plays, to use in teaching English.

Just recently, I picked up a little book, "Stranger in Town: A Play for Students of English," by Lou Spaventa (Pro Lingua Associates, 1992) and the accompanying CD, on which some individuals with fine voices act out a play about a guy named Bob Pellegrino and his experiences as a newcomer in a small town. I found this at the Pro Lingua booth at TESOL 2007 in Seattle, and, as usual with their materials, it is wonderfully authentic and relevant communication. My high beginning/low intermediate students in a vocabulary class really made big strides in their confidence, motivation, and listening and reading ability in the process of doing activities built around this text and the CD. It was fun and they could relate to the main character's difficulties (and joys) in getting used to living in a new place.

If you haven't ever read through a story, play, or novel with a group of English language learners, you are in for a real treat when you do so. The developing storyline establishes an expanding context to support meaning as you and your students get further and further into the shared experience. Inevitably, ideas will occur to you for news items, Web links, songs, and images to bring in for the purpose of accentuating the story's effect and impact.

In one scene early in the Lou Spaventa play, a song similar to "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" is on the jukebox in a cafeteria where the main character, Bob, is eating breakfast. I brought in the words to the song and we listened to a version by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. This led to further exploration of country music, and accidentally dovetailed with a music unit the students were studying at the same time in a reading class with another teacher.

Those kinds of surprises seem to happen more often when a teacher is taking students experientially together through a story or play. When such connections occur, there is an intellectual thrill involved which leaves a lasting impression.

You'll see one of your students weeks or months later, and smile together

as you remember these magical coincidences.

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