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Writing is Writing is Writing: Applying Best Practice to Writing in a Languages Other Than English

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Back-to-college Blues

I teach Japanese language at a suburban high school in Michigan. Yes, you read that correctly, Japanese language at a high school. The community has active ties with its sister city in Japan, and there are several Japanese companies in town that employ my students' parents. Having Japanese at the high school makes a lot of sense to the members of my community, and there is widespread support for the program by administrators, parents and students. Community support, however, does not protect the language program from the whims of student enrollment and state funding. While most French and Spanish teachers are not too concerned about enrollment dropping and their jobs being in jeopardy, for teachers of less commonly taught world languages—such as Japanese, Russian, Chinese—there is always the concern that numbers could drop, and the position could become merely part-time. With this in mind my principal encouraged me to add an endorsement in English to my teaching certificate.

I appreciate that my principal has my best interests in mind, but I have to admit that taking and paying for more classes after just finishing an MA in Japanese Language and Literature was not very appealing. At least I knew I would enjoy the literature classes; I pictured myself reading Shakespeare or Jane Austin on the beach and meeting with my fellow classmate in dimly lit cafes or bars to discuss and apply Derrida's theory of deconstructionism and other important "isms" to post-modern novels. However, taking more

education classes really made me cringe. While much easier to read, the theories I imagined taking away from the education classes would probably be as useful to teaching Freshman English as deconstructionist theory would be. So cursing bureaucracy in all its forms, I enrolled in what one of my friends lovingly refers to as the "principle time-waster of university life," an education class.

Entitled "Teaching Writing in the Secondary Classroom," this class promised to "give prospective English teachers some intensive instruction in ways to write, and, more importantly, ways to teach writing at the middle school and high school levels." That first day of class I entered the classroom with the usual amount of skepticism, but much to my surprise the professor actually put into practice the theory he supported and taught—best practice. Best of all, I never imagined that there would be the degree of overlap that I have discovered between teaching English and teaching a second language; really, what do English writing and writing for a second language have in common? Surprisingly, from a best practice perspective, quite a lot.

What is Best Practice?

So what is best practice and what makes it so great? In a nut shell, it is counter to all the traditional practices of the English classroom—an over-emphasis on grammatical correctness, writing a five-paragraph essay, submitting a piece of writing for an audience of one, the teacher. Plenty of great writers were taught with these practices, so what is wrong with the traditional approach? It treats writing as a product rather than a process; it denies the role writing plays in thinking; it values the expository essay over other forms of writing; it has students write in isolation about a topic chosen by the teacher.

In contrast, best practice and the writing process prepare students to use writing for a variety of purposes—such as advocacy, creative, personal, informative—not just academic, and students often chose the topic and the form of the writing. In the best practice approach the teacher often defines the context of the assignment and the type of audience

who will read the finished product. However, the students have to consider how the audience will interact with their final product and what form of writing will work the best. Instead of telling students that they will write an essay of a particular length, assignments are structured to actively involve students in the decision making process from the beginning. Students are invested in the finished product because they helped define the intent of the writing.

Best practice still acknowledges the importance of grammar, but without making the grade solely reliant on the correctness of the paper. In a best practice classroom, students master skills in the context of writing, so the nuts and bolts of writing (grammar, spelling, punctuation) are not isolated from the purpose at hand. Students are learning the art of written communication; they are not drilling for grammatical correctness.

Students reflect on their own writing and the writing of others, and they learn how to identify what is successful in the writing. Instead of relying on the teacher to be the only authority on good writing in the classroom, students learn how to identify and articulate what works and what doesn't work in a piece of writing. They learn that it isn't enough to say that something is good; they have to be specific about what is good in order to give effective feedback to their peers.

Writing takes place in the classroom, and there are multiple opportunities for feedback from multiple sources long before the writing is assigned a grade at the end of the project. Students also have opportunities to share their writing with audiences beyond the teacher. Students are writing in the presence of and with the support of their peers and teacher. In short, the best practice approach to writing has students writing for purposes that extend beyond the classroom and “. . . focuses on the experience of composing text about the experiences one has in real life” (Tchudi 138).

What does best practice look like in the English classroom?

During my own years of studying English and literature at high school in a traditional classroom, I never really thought about how I would apply the skills I learned to the world outside the English classroom. Indeed, in the traditional approach the purpose of an essay is to impress the teacher with a logical argument and get a good grade. Once I figured out what kind of writing that teacher liked, I was able to adjust my writing for that person. We never really practiced writing that went beyond academic writing or the occasional short story for fun. Writing was something I did for my English teacher, not for myself, and the writing often took place on my bedroom floor the night before it was due. In class, we quietly listened to lectures or participated in group discussions; we never shared our writing with fellow students except for the occasional short story assignment, and we rarely wrote in class unless there was an essay exam. I don't really recall ever discussing my writing with my English teachers; our “discussions” were limited to the comments the teacher wrote in red at the bottom of the paper after a grade was already assigned. Writing was a lonely endeavor, and the keys to successful writing were shrouded in mystery.

In thankful contrast, the classroom employing a best practice approach is filled with the noise of students discussing and sharing ideas and writing. There are multiple pieces of each student's writing on file for the student to refer to later when the idea can be developed into something more. Different groups of students and individuals are working at the same time on a variety of projects. Those projects could include letter writing to politicians, media outlets, authors, and others in the community for students to get their voices heard or to discover something new, or students creating class magazines, storybooks or libraries of student work. The options are endless. The atmosphere is one of controlled chaos where the teacher is no longer the center of the writing universe, and the mysterious shroud cloaking the keys to successful writing has been removed.

How does Best Practice Apply to Foreign Language Teaching?

So how can these theories that work so well for English work in a Japanese class? Well if your high school foreign language learning experience was like mine, it was less about communication more about translation and conjugating verbs. In today's foreign language classroom, the emphasis is on communication and motivational outcomes. In other words, the goal of language learning is communication, so the outcomes I ask my students to achieve should be meaningful, reflect real life situations, and motivate them to learn for a purpose beyond a traditional test.

The current trend in foreign language teaching to emphasize spoken and written communication as it is used in real situations corresponds with the best practice idea that students should write to a real audience with a genuine purpose. My Japanese teaching is driven by the situation or context in which the language will be used. The context helps to determine the performance or product that the students will create at the end of the unit, which in turn drives the nuts and bolts (grammar patterns, vocabulary) of the unit. Just as in the best practice approach, the grammar of the language is secondary to the ways in which it can be applied. Grammar is not learned for the sake of grammar. I am concerned with the real application of what is being learned, and so are my students.

The emphasis in best practice of having the creation of the end product—the process—take place in the classroom also resonates with me. With language learning it is almost impossible for students to find a context beyond the classroom to practice what they learn, and it is highly unlikely that parents would be able to give feedback on their work. A few have access to on-line resources, but not all of their home computers can read Japanese. Besides their notes, my students have little access to information about Japanese language. My students are taking Japanese as an elective, so most of them have a reason beyond high school graduation requirements for taking the language. I want to support my

students as much as possible, and using class time for students to create their products is the best way for this to happen.

In addition, language learning at any level rarely happens in isolation, so students need to work together to become good at the language and to complete projects. In my classroom I encourage students to help each other. Not only because they are learning language, but also to emphasize the importance of the “group” in Japanese culture. Some of my first-year students tell me that Japanese class is the only one in which they know the names of all the other students. There are many reasons for this: I give an all-or-nothing quiz on everyone's names the second week of class; Japanese language favors names over personal pronouns, which are considered rude; I change the seating chart every two weeks; but most importantly, students are encouraged to work with someone different everyday. When students know each other trust develops, and they are more likely to share ideas. I work to create a classroom that favors cooperative and shared learning over competition, which is another tenet of best practice.

While many of the concepts of best practice were not completely foreign—no pun intended—to my teaching philosophy and practice, I realized that I wasn't applying them as consistently or as thoroughly as I could. Even though I had writing projects in place, they were not models of best practice. So using the new tools of best practice, I set out to improve writing projects in my upper level classes. Just as learning writing with a best practice approach is process-oriented and on-going, so has been the application best practice to my Japanese classes.

Walking the Walk

A children's book writing project I had for my third-year students was a ripe place to apply best practice. In reality, it is not very likely that students will need to write a children's book in Japanese. However, using the format of the children's book provided a real audience with whom the students could share their writing. One of the local

elementary schools is within walking distance, and there are a number of native-speaking Japanese students at the school. Presenting to the elementary students is a motivator for my students, and watching the presentations may lead to future interest in the elementary students. The children's book is also an opportunity for students who have artistic talents to share their creativity. Functionally, the books provide a means for students to review sentence structure and apply new ways of writing compound sentences outside of the format of a five-paragraph essay.

While the children's book was a project I already had in place, I realized that the way the rubric was structured didn't reward and recognize the students for the process involved in the writing of the book. If I'm asking the students to do the work for an end product, and they have to do all of the work to create a quality product, I need to recognize the effort involved. I broke the process down into pre-writing, writing, revision, and final product and performance segments. One of the great things about the process approach to writing is that it tasks students throughout the project, so ideally they don't get behind in their work.

I tried to structure each assignment in the process to imitate the steps in getting a book published. The pre-writing was structured to represent a book proposal, the revisions were designed to include a letter to the editor about concerns with the draft, and in post-writing students were required to write a letter of rejection or recommendation for their co-authors as a way to measure equality of effort between the partners. During performances, students wrote simple reviews for the peers, which were included anonymously with the final feedback from the teacher. All of these aspects were written in English. After the assignment we also deconstructed the project as a class and discussed what worked and what didn't. I have also used the same approach with Japanese 4 assignments to create comic books and do cooking presentations and recipes in Japanese.

Overall I've been impressed with the results of the assignments using the best practice approach.

Each time I do them I am able to make my expectations more clear to the students because I have a better idea of what is possible. Making each step in the writing process a concrete element of the assignment with feedback from the teacher and peers keeps students on track in terms of the assignment and helps them understand what type of work is required to make a quality product. The students really enjoy creating with the language, and my Japanese 4 class was very excited to get a bilingual cookbook with everyone's recipes at the end of the unit.

Differences between English and Japanese

Since I am applying the writing process to writing in Japanese rather than writing English in a Japanese classroom, evaluation and grading relies more heavily on lower order concerns regarding grammar, but in Japanese the idea of audience is very strong. Language reflects culture, and in Japanese culture the audience determines the type of verb structures that are used and the formality of the language. There are also the inherent differences of the written and spoken language in any language. Also, I want to get students to think about how language is culturally specific, and how it cannot be directly translated word for word. I want students to realize that the meaning they wish to express involves more than just substituting the words of one language for the words of another; it also involves understanding how context shapes the experience. Giving students extended time in class to grapple with writing extended pieces of prose has really developed their awareness of the inherent differences in language.

Because students are still at the novice level in their language learning, responding to other people's written work is a difficult undertaking. Few students have the linguistic awareness and confidence to give feedback on the work or make suggestions for corrections. I have concerns about students learning incorrect forms from their peers during the process of reading other people's work. Currently, peer feedback has been related to final performances rather than on-going feedback during

the preparation process. I need to figure out a response guide that will train students on how to give feedback from the beginning levels of Japanese. I also think I need to explore how elementary teachers apply best practice at the novice levels as it relates to peer feedback. In addition to developing a working response guide, my next goal is to develop a research project for Japanese 5 based on the best practice approach.

Writing is Writing

Regardless of the orthography or grammar involved, writing in either English or a foreign language requires the writer to put thoughts to paper in a way that communicates with another human being. My students understand complex arguments and ideas, yet their command of the language limits what they can say in foreign languages. My job is to guide them with assignments that require them to apply what they can say in a meaningful and creative way in a supported environment. The best practice approach is the most effective means to this end.

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About the Author:

Tracy Pollard is in her second year of teaching Japanese language at Lakeview High School in Battle Creek, MI. Her non-direct path to classroom teaching has included interpreting and translating in Japan, teaching English in a Japanese junior high, tutoring recent immigrants in ESL, and tutoring at-risk youth through the Upward Bound Program. This summer her beach bag will include the classics of American literature as she continues to work on becoming highly qualified to teach English. Comments can be directed to tpollard@bc-lakeview.k12.mi.us.