Connecting Reading, Writing, and Culture through a Literacies-based Approach to Narrative

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Globalization has had an impact on many different aspects of higher education in Japan. In particular it has led to an increase in the number of universities that are choosing to promote an international experience as a way of fostering intercultural awareness. This has created issues for many English language programs as research has suggested that the dominant skills-based, communicative approach to teaching English may not be effective for developing the kinds of literacies that allow students to succeed while studying overseas (Kramsch, 2006; 2014). In this paper, we focus on one unit of a course. This unit is built around the use of narrative texts and demonstrates how a program can meaningfully connect reading and writing to help students both understand academically challenging cultural content and to promote textual and linguistic awareness. We argue that this 'linking of literacies' (Hirvela, 2004) is necessary if we want students to develop the kinds of reflexive disposition towards language and discourse that will enable them to actively participate in different cultural contexts.

グローバリゼーションは日本の高等教育の様々な側面に影響を与え、殊にグローバル意識の育成を目指した国際経験促進のためのポリシーは、英語教育プログラムにおける問題を生んでいる。具体的なものとして、応用言語学の文献では、現在優勢を振るっているスキルベースのコミュニカティブアプローチは既に学習者に対し最も役立つかもしれない種のリテラシーの構築には効果的でないかもしれない（Kramsch, 2006；2014）と論じられている。本論文では、プログラムがどのようにしてリーディングとライティングを学問的挑戦を要する文化的内容とテキスト及び言語意識を一つにするリテラシー演習として意味深く繋げることができるか、それを明らかにするナラティヴのユニットに焦点を置き、複数リテラシーのリンク（Hirvela, 2004）が、学習者が異なる文化環境で活躍するのに必要不可欠な学問的および社会的参画を可能とする種の、言語と談話に対する再帰傾向の構築に重要であることを論じる。

Government funding, through the "Global 30 Project", to selected universities that encourages Japanese college students to study abroad (see Aspinall, 2013) is emblematic of the strategic increase in the global nature of Japanese higher education. Internationalization, however, comes with concomitant pressure to raise proficiency standards and foster greater intercultural understanding, at a time when standards in education in Japan have been falling through demographic pressure and as a result of the *yutori kyoiku* (or relaxed education) policies of the 1990's (see Lassegard, 2006). In this educational

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context, the dominant discreet, communicative skills-based approach to foreign language education may not be effective, due to its lack of cultural content and its narrow view of language as a set of skills to be mastered (see Kramsch, 2006; MLA, 2007; Schulz, 2006).

In this paper, we focus on a unit of work within a first-year university reading and writing course that tries to address these problems by using a syllabus that involves learners progressing through units of work focusing on different text types and discourses (see Gee, 2002; Byrnes, Crane, Maxim, & Sprang, 2006). We also present and discuss an assignment submitted by one of the students who was enrolled in this course to demonstrate the effectiveness of this new course in raising genre awareness in students. The course being discussed in this article is structured so that the students are involved in iterative cycles of textual analysis, interpretation, and production as the focus of the content shifts from the familiar texts of daily interaction, progressing through literary texts, and again onto the texts and discourses of public and academic settings (Gee, 2002). This is done so that students are able to experience and produce a range of genres, discourses and rhetoric types, as research has shown that this experience will better allow them to "participate effectively in the world outside the ESL classroom" (Hyland, 2007, p. 48). This course demonstrates further how meaningfully connecting reading and writing as literacy practice can help students to begin to understand academically challenging cultural content as well as improve their textual and linguistic awareness.

Background to the Program

In 2012, Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) was the beneficiary of a large government "Global 30" grant to promote study abroad opportunities for our learners in western universities and colleges. A primary concern for preparing learners for longer study abroad experiences is to have students reach the requisite levels on institutional tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. Universities in the United States, for example, typically require a score between 450 and 500 on the TOEFL IBT for an undergraduate student to enter a program as an international student. Reading proficiency is an important component of the TOEFL and the TOEIC examinations that are used as markers of progress at our university. So, in planning the redevelopment of our courses, we were mindful of this aspect of student proficiency. However, another important concern is with our learners' experience once they actually make it abroad. Our program needs to prepare learners for multiple literacies, both digital and text based, if they are to succeed in meeting the challenges of studying and living abroad. A preliminary needs analysis was done across the entire first year population of our students and this confirmed, amongst other things, the fact that for this generation of students, online and digital texts are now the most common way that they interact and access information and entertainment (for a discussion of the importance of digital literacy see Kress, 2003). With this emerging online literacy, it has been argued, comes the need for critical thinking and interpretation skills, or as McPherson (2008) explains it: "students need to learn how to master reading and writing, but also learn how to communicate – to compose, to problem solve, and understand across a wider set of culturally diverse and multiple meaning making forms" (p. 37). The curriculum in place at KUIS up until 2012 lacked the appropriate content or approach that could really develop this kind of disposition towards language, culture and text.

Indeed, up until 2012, the reading and writing program for first year students had been developed with commercial textbooks that focused on the two aspects of written text as if they were entirely separate. The reading course featured extensive reading, through graded readers, and the writing course focused almost exclusively on the five-paragraph essay. If we consider Kern's (2000) argument that literacy involves interrelated cognitive, linguistic and sociocultural aspects, it is clear that what was really missing from the courses was the sociocultural element. More importantly, the program was also lacking the sense that reading and writing are intimately connected dimensions of written communication. It became clear that we needed to base our instruction around "a more unified discussion of relationships between readers, writers, culture, and language learning" (Kern, 2000,

p. 2).

Combining Reading and Writing: Foundational Literacies

The multiliteracies-based approach (New London Group, 1996) was chosen to provide the foundation of the program because it offers a theoretically coherent orientation to language education that deals with both the textual and the cultural diversity that define globalization. As explained above, the course was designed to allow students to encounter as large a variety of text types as possible - that is, they were exposed to a range of different discourse types and rhetorical modes, to build awareness and textual capacity (Widdowson, 1983) in preparation for more advanced foreign language literacy courses in their second year of study, and beyond, in future study abroad contexts. Gee (2002) argues that most texts fall into primary (experiential, sense-of-self), blurred (literary) and secondary (institutional, 'public') discourse types. Additionally, 'narration' is traditionally seen as one of the four rhetorical modes, the others being exposition, description and argumentation (Meurer, 2002) that comprise the fundamental ways that meaning is constructed in academic and public contexts. Given this basic structure, we were able to map out an overall scheme for the new course that ensured learners were exposed to, and came to understand, different discourse types, as represented in Table 1.

Organisation of the Narrative Unit

The course is then organized into seven different content units, with narrative texts being taught as one of four content units in the first semester (along with email, recipes and product reviews). Key to the design of all of the content units was the overall pedagogical heuristic that is provided in the multiliteracies literature (See Table 2).

Throughout the progression of the narrative unit (approximately ten lessons in total) students are first, in situated practice, asked to tell meaningful stories from their own experiences. They are then, in a sequence of overt instruction activities, introduced to Labov's (1972) model of narrative structure, exposed to a range of different sub-genres of narrative, and asked to analyse the extent to which the five-part model is applicable to the examples they have been given. The sub-genres that feature in the narrative unit include travel blogs, personal narratives, traditional folk stories, news stories, and constructed narratives. The folk stories include fables and legends from a variety of different countries and different cultural contexts in order to accentuate the universality of certain forms and features of narrative texts (such as narrative structure). When exposed to each sub-genre, learners are given vocabulary tasks and within the unit there are also explicit lexicogrammar focus activities. Throughout the course, students are also asked to reflect on the field, tenor and mode of given texts; to consider the writer, their purpose and the target audience; and to consider the idea of 'language as choice', that is fundamental to the literacies-based approach. Within fairy tales, for example, students are asked to think about what unique, literary words or phrases are used, and why. With news stories they are asked to consider why news narratives often use a

Table 1
Overview of the Course

Discourse Type	Classroom Texts	Production Texts: Assessment
Primary	Personal email, Recipes, Recounts Personal narratives	Personal email Recipe Recount
Blurred	Folk tales, Poem, Song lyrics, Short story	Literary narrative
Secondary	Information report, Essay, Business correspondence, Formal email, Product review, Newspaper feature article	Information report Product review Persuasive essay

Table 2
Overview of the Narrative Unit

Pedagogical Sequence	Realization in the Narrative Unit
Situated Practice: Immersion in meaningful practices within a community of learners	Personal narrative: learners tell, read and analyze personal narratives with a view to creating their own story and voice based on their own experiences
Overt Instruction: Scaffolding learning through explicit attention to key concepts and metalanguage	Narrative structure and vocabulary: Learners study Labov's (1972) narrative structure (main theme, scene setting, complicating action, further action, result and evaluation) and apply the model to several different narratives in different discourses
Critical Framing: Problematizing or looking again at what has been learned and applying the knowledge to new situations or problems.	Contrast between western and Japanese folk tales: Japanese folk tales often lack the moral aspect of western folk or fairy stories. Understanding why this might be the case is an important insight into narrative and culture.
Transformed Practice: Shifting meaning across boundaries of genre, mode, and or context (New London Group, 1996).	Re-writing a narrative for a different textual genre: Applying the new understanding of how narratives work to a different rhetorical situation is both a learning experience and provides opportunity for summative assessment.

mixture of formal and informal lexis. Most of these activities take place as group discussions. Students are also exposed to a 'genuine' (as opposed to a constructed) personal narrative, written by a student of approximately the same age but from a different culture, based on the theme of growing up/change (Charlton, 2010). This particular narrative was chosen as it provides a relevant example of a 'small' narrative in which very little drama occurs, demonstrating to students that a narrative does not need to be dramatic. Students are then exposed to pseudo-personal narratives that are superficially similar to this personal narrative. These samples are taken from online sources that are used to sell a spiritual guide/ series of self-help books (Secret, 2016), where the 'customers' supposedly share their own personal experiences, but where the actual intention is probably persuasive rather than informative or humanistic. Students are invited to notice and then reflect on these underlying differences.

Example of Student Work: Transformed Practice

The key tasks within each unit feature reading and comprehension activities. There are, however, typically two key 'production' activities in each unit, one of which is the final assignment, where, in the case of the narrative unit, students write their own personal narrative. The rubric for this assignment grades the students on their ability to show understanding of and to apply narrative structure, as well as their ability to produce the mechanics, lexicogrammar and content appropriate to their task.

The other productive activity that students are asked to do in each unit is a more creative one and is in keeping with the idea of transformed practice, as described briefly in Table 2. Starting with a text in one sub-genre, students are asked to redesign the text according to different rhetorical and functional aims, ultimately producing a text that has the same content but that is appropriate for a different audience and purpose. In the narrative unit, learners are typically shown a video from a famous advertisement that has redesigned the ending of the *Three Little Pigs* fairytale in the form of a news story (Guardian, 2012). In this case, both the mode (from written/oral to audio-visual) and sub-genre (from fairytale to news narrative) have been transformed, and this has led to

other differences, for example the meaning and the target audience of the two narratives are different. After reflecting on these changes, students are asked to re-write one of the narratives they have read, either a fairytale into a news story or vice versa. After they have changed the genre of the narrative, students are then asked to describe and explain the changes that they made. For example, why the changes they made to the vocabulary or structure of the narrative were seen as more appropriate for their new purpose, etc. A student example is shown in Appendix A. This student chose to transform the Japanese fairy tale *Yuki Onna* into a news story (the student's name has been changed). The Japanese folk tale offers us a different cultural perspective on narrative and is a good example of critical framing, where students are asked to look again at material they feel they have already understood. The idea of human agency in light of the overwhelming power of nature is a common theme in Japanese literature and art, and having Japanese learners re-think not only narrative, but other cultural texts (e.g. the famous Hokusai woodblock print 'the great wave') that they are familiar with, from this new perspective, can lead to interesting classroom discussions.

Looking at this transformed narrative that was produced in class, we can observe that the student has clearly made some significant changes to the original text that suggest that she has, to a large degree, achieved 'genre consciousness'. She is clearly aware of the differences in form, style and content of each sub-genre (fairytale and news narrative) and her transformative practice here makes that salient. In terms of content, the student has changed the meaning of the story. While the original tale was about a mysterious and beautiful ghostly lady who killed one man and married another in a human guise, the transformed news story instead foregrounds the 'crime' itself and the suspicion surrounding it. It also places the action in the modern day. Mystery and horror, which work well in traditional tales, make way for rumour and suspicion, as is often the case with genuine news reports of this type.

The student, in her reflection (see Appendix B), confirms these choices were rooted in her awareness of the traits of different sub-genres: "In the Japanese story we never know why the action happened and usually fairy tales have a reason. This was difficult to decide, and so finally I made it a story that hasn't been solved." Similarly, she later comments, "The story is not a Japanese folk story and so I must to make (sic) the explanation clear to the reader."

The student demonstrates awareness of the stylistic differences that exist between fairytales and news stories. Visually, she has chosen to use a picture and has a headline that is written in a large text. She also makes use of sub-headings. Once again, we know these are conscious choices the student has made as she explains in her reflection, that, "Sub-headline can be used in a newspaper to help the reader", and "I put in the picture... to a follow (sic) tabloid style. If there is a criminal the tabloid tries to show them and especially they like to have pictures of beautiful girls!"

In terms of lexicogrammar, here too she has chosen to make significant changes in her retelling of events. As she explains, "I used more conversational style. I took out literary words for the different newspaper style", hence "dazzling white garments" become Gucci designer clothes. The news narrative, deliberately, also makes greater use of "short paragraphs." In doing so, the student has clearly thought about the target audience and typical tabloid reader and engineered her language with this in mind: "This makes it easier to read for audience who doesn't have much time – maybe they are reading on the train to work."

In completing a transformative task, students are acting with agency and as authors are taking a more active role in their own learning: "The focus on transformation rather than on acquisition makes the designer agentive... with the designer's interests in this occasion of design and in relation to that audience" (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). In transforming meaning across genres, the affordances and constraints of different ways of representing meaning are highlighted, thus facilitating a creative and critical disposition towards the rhetorical work of narrative. This activity, we argue, leads to heightened awareness of the act of communication in written text itself. For educators, looking at the student complete a transformational task allows us to gain "insight into the variation and range" of a student's "meaning-making" abilities

(Stein, 2008, p. 44).

Conclusion

In this short paper, we have argued that discreet, skills-based approaches to reading and writing are problematic due to their restricted cultural content and inherent lack of awareness of written text as essentially an act of sociocultural communication. We have used the example of a unit built around narrative genres to highlight a productive way that we are using bring reading and writing together through a focus on the construction of textual meaning. We have also included an example of a transformational narrative assignment written by a student to illustrate the ways in which this technique is succeeding in our context. This is by necessity only a brief snapshot of the kind of work and activity that our learners are engaged in, and we believe that it is important to design our individual courses and then the overall curriculum to engage learners in this type of meaningful engagement with texts, language and culture. Additional work is required to further develop our materials and to better understand the efficacy of our approach for language education in the increasingly global context of Japanese higher education.

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Appendix A: Student's news story

Police Looking for Mystery Woman: Is She the Sendai Murderer?

By Staff Writer: Yuri Saito

Police yesterday were looking for a woman who they think might be very dangerous. She was reported as disappeared from her family home by a neighbor. Nobody can understand the story of how she has left her family and police are asking for help with this mystery. According to the reports, the woman is called Yuki Onna and she has black hair and is very tall. She is usually seen wearing expensive designer-label white clothes.

Mrs. Yuki Onna: Have you seen her?

A witness said they saw her leaving the home very quickly with suspicious behavior. Her husband is very upset. His name is Minokichi. He is famous in Sendai because he was the apprentice who lost his boss in the famous accident that was never solved 20 years ago. He now has 10 children. Where has his wife gone?

Nobody could talk with Minokichi yesterday but one of his friends told us he was very happy with his life recently. However, neighbours told our reporter that they heard a woman screaming and threatening to kill somebody late at night yesterday.

The famous accident happened when Minokichi, and his boss, Mosaku were cutting wood in a nearby forest. Because of the bad weather they stayed in the business hotel. But the next morning Mosaku was found dead. It was a very strange story because Minokichi was fine and there were no witnesses. Sources close to the family said in a rumor that people nearby thought Minokichi had killed his boss during the night.

Big Suspicion

There was big suspicion in Sendai. Did Minokichi steal money from his boss and company? It was never understood the story of their relationship. Minokichi said it was the snow and cold that killed his boss but it was difficult to show evidence in court to support this story.

Shortly after this event, Minokichi got married and had many children. He didn't seem so sad about the death of his old boss after all. Many people thought so.

Police are thinking there might be a relationship to the disappearing woman and Mosaku. Did he kill her as well? Is she the murderer? If you have information, please help the police with this terrible story.

Appendix B: Student's reflection

Reflection:

1. How did you change the organization?

The story has to be shorter to fit tabloid style. Headline is not full sentences. Sub-headline can be used in a newspaper to help the reader. I tried to make the story modern with a new police force and fitting the style of newspapers of today. In the Japanese story we never know why the action happened and usually fairy tales have a reason. This was difficult to decide, and so finally I made it a story that hasn't been solved. It is difficult to fit that part of the story into a new kind of text for me.

2. How did you change the style?

I used more conversational style. I took out literary words for the different newspaper style. For example, in the story describes her clothes as "dazzling". But since this is modern times I wanted to use designer-wear, like Gucci. I also had to break up the story into short paragraphs. This makes it easier to read for audience who doesn't have much time – maybe they are reading on the train to work.

3. How did you change the story?

The story is not a Japanese folk story and so I must to make the explanation clear to the reader. In the folk story nobody knows why it happened. A newspaper tries to tell the story to be clear. I found that tabloids like to use gossip and rumor to make their story and so I used the neighbors and things that people said to tell the story.

4. What other changes did you make? Why?

I put in the picture for Yuki Onna to a follow tabloid style. If there is a criminal the tabloid tries to show them and especially they like to have pictures of beautiful girls!

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