

OVERVIEW

This is my first year teaching EAL (English as an Additional Language) at a High School in Winnipeg. My students are from all over the world: The Philippines, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa, Cuba, Vietnam, China, and many more countries whose names I am learning to pronounce. I teach students (whose ages range from fifteen to nineteen) at the intermediate levels, so they have some basis of English when they enter my class. Generally, their basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) have developed enough so we can carry on conversations, although there are always pronunciation confusions. In terms of their writings, they are able to construct sentences, and a semblance of structure is forming, but grammatical errors occur regularly.

RATIONALE

After our three sessions in August, I realized that I wanted to include storytelling into my weekly teaching. So, one day a week has been entitled “Storytelling Day.” I didn’t exactly know where I was going to go with it, but I had at least made the beginnings of a commitment. So, the first day of school comes along and I am overwhelmed as all of these new faces pile in. Even though the class size is smaller than I am used to (it’s about 20 to 25 students per class), I still feel like the walls in the room are closing in on me. Accents overwhelm me. I can’t hear what one person is saying, so I have to lean in close, or I keep repeating, “please, say that again. I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

On the second day of school, I ask one student, while we’re in casual conversation, if she has a part-time job. She responds, “No, Allah does not permit it.” I’m completely thrown. Suddenly I realize that I have no idea what these teenagers are going through. I have no idea what they are thinking. All of my liberal, North American assumptions need to be thrown right out the window. I need to develop more of an empathetic, non-partial ear. Most importantly, I know that I need to know their stories.

OBJECTIVES

I must admit, I feel as though I am walking on thin ice. The diversity in the class is not only exciting, but also unnerving. My students are so different from one another—from their languages, to their customs, to their religious beliefs. Past and present world wars have been and are based on cultural divides. So, in a large way, I feel as though I need to unify. Yet I know that I must unify without erasing difference. I need to find a way for my classroom to feel like a safe haven. I want

everyone to feel welcome. My plan is to do this through storytelling. Through storytelling, I hope to build connectedness and trust throughout the class. Writer Mara Sapon-Shevin says that “in well-developed communities, people feel a part of the whole. They know that they are needed, valued members of the group” (1999, p.17). I want every one of my students to feel as though s/he has a voice. I want her/his voice to be heard.

THE PLAN

Since it is the beginning of the year, and some of my students are still very shy, I do not want to start with a speaking activity. I fear it would frighten many. Instead I want to start with the following writing assignment: “Tell me *your* story. Where are you from? How did you get here, to Winnipeg? Why did you leave your country? How long have you been here? Who have you come here with? Are you happy you are here?”

Once students have responded to me, I will read the stories and look for similar words, phrases, emotions. Behind the difference there is always similarity; it is human nature. These people have all undergone pain and loss. They are all going through a huge transition in their lives. We need to embrace and share it, and build our classroom community from this foundation. I will recopy their shared experiences and turn it into a story poem. I am not *writing* the poem; I am merely assembling it. The words will be theirs. This is a critical point, for I want the story poem to build empowerment. Senehi and Byrne state that “empowering storytelling needs to provide power equality. [It] is about including stories rather than using stories dogmatically to promote a particular point of view” (2006, p. 254). By developing this collective piece, all of their stories will be recognized and appreciated.

After the story poem is assembled, as a class activity, we will read through the poem using various choral reading practices. Choral reading, much like singing, brings the words to life. Key lines and phrases are stated a certain way and add emphasis and effect to the story. It also enhances group work by developing social cooperation (McCaslin, 2005). The entire class will take part in the telling, hopefully creating a unifying effect. After all is said and done (literally), students will choose their favourite line(s) from the story poem and draw a picture of any thoughts or feelings that derive from the line(s). I will then collect the pictures and turn the story poem into a picture book. Hopefully, the librarian will allow us to display the book in the library for awhile. Then I will keep it in my classroom for all to read. This way we will all remember to respect their stories.

The Lonely Immigrant

Voice 1: I was born in The Philippines
 Voices 1 and 2: Somalia
 Voices, 1, 2, and 3: Ethiopia
 Voices 1, 2, 3, and 4: Kenya
 Voices 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5: Sudan
 Voices 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6: Vietnam

Voice 1: I came to Winnipeg in February.
 Voice 1: The night was so cloudy and cold.
 Voice 1: Suddenly, I realized that I wanted to go home.
 Voice 2: Suddenly I realized that I was alone.
 Voice 3: No friends, no family
 Voice 3: Just me.
 Voice 2: A dagger sliced through my heart.

Female Voices: I don't know my father
 Male Voices: I haven't seen my mother in years.
 Female Voices: Mother killed.
 Male Voices: Father dead.
 Female Voices: Father killed.
 Male Voices: Mother dead.

1 Male 1 Female Voice: I love my family so much.
 ALL Voices: We will all be together
 1 Female: Soon.
 1 Male: One day.

All Voices: So why am I here?

Voice 1: I ask myself every day.
 Voice 2: A war broke out in my country.
 Voice 3: I don't want to live in poverty.
 Voice 4: I don't want to be a refugee.
 Voice 5: In Canada, nobody calls me a refugee.
 Voice 6: I want a better job, work, family.
 Voice 7: I want to live happily, peacefully.
 Voice 8: I want a new home.

ALL VOICES: So please, welcome me.

Activity Analysis

My storytelling activity was much more powerful than I had expected. My EAL students (ages fifteen to nineteen) first wrote to me, telling me their stories: where they are from, why they moved here, who they came here with, if they are happy here. Once I assigned the questions, the class went hard to work. I wanted them to write to me first because I wanted to protect their anonymity. I did not want them to feel pressured to share anything private so publicly. There was dead silence as they wrote. No one spoke for at least half an hour. Everyone was writing away. I did not realize that they were so eager to share.

I read their stories as soon as I got home. I wept all night. The same lines appeared over and over: “My mother is dead. That’s why I am here . . . I was sad when I left the Philippines because my mother, sister and two brothers were not coming with me. . . I am a refugee and I don’t want to be a refugee no more.” On and on they went. Fear, loneliness, isolation. I thought, oh no, Lynn and Annette would not be happy with this sad story. During our summer session with Lynn I remember her saying, “Storytelling should be about healing, joy, humour!” Well, I did not know how to get humour out of these stories of pain. But there was certainly hope. All of my students explained to me that they were here to build a better life. They wanted to start anew and they wanted to be welcomed. This was the message that everyone needed to hear. Out of darkness comes salvation.

Once I assembled the story, I brought it back to the class. I gave each person a copy and asked them to make any changes they wanted. I also asked them to think of a title. The Lonely Immigrant emerged. It was selected via the vote. I like this title too, for it shows these students’ desires for compassion. They want to make friends, fit in. Also, while they were reading it, I heard a few say, “Hey, that’s my line! . . . That happened to me! . . . Yeah, it was so cold when I came here!” I could tell that they recognized the events. A kinship grew, for they realized that they have all been connected by a similar story. It was, in fact, their story.

We then practiced reading the story aloud through various choral reading strategies. Here’s where the laughter came in (I am happy to report). Getting the timing right, reading in unison, knowing the cue, saying the words properly were all part of the fun. For the solos, I chose students who were a little more willing to speak in front of a crowd. Yet, everyone had a line to say. We

played around with who would say what, or how to say something. Putting in emphasis and adding in effect. As they read on and became more confident, I noticed a powerful strength emerge. Even the shy ones started to feel more self-assured.

At one point, I became sad that we were not performing this in front of a crowd. Then I realized that performance is not critical at this stage. Rather, it is the community building, the sense of unity that is developing as they work together to create the story. One goal of the storytelling process is to create relationships (Campano, 2007). The students are building their relationship of safety, honesty, and respect. Through this activity, they created a safe environment where their diversity no longer implies difference. The choral reading helped them create an intimate moment, a unity that may not have been acquired otherwise. They have found a new respect for one another, for they share the same story.

Later, students chose their favourite lines from the story and either drew pictures or created collages to represent the lines. I am in the process of assembling the book version right now. Their drawings were very intriguing. Many depicted the isolation they feel. On the other hand, however, many drew flags of their former countries, showing a pride for where they are from. This was an aspect I did not anticipate. I figured, who would want to be proud of a war-torn country, of a place that almost destroyed you? Even as they recited the story, I wondered why some people were so adamant about saying the first stanza. The voices for these parts beamed with pride as they announced where they were from. Yet once again, my ignorance resonated. Even though these people are ready and willing to make a new life here, they cannot—and should not—forget their old one. It is part of who they are. They are the people they are today because of how they lived in the past. You cannot escape the past, so why bother running from it? This is why the first stanza in the story is important to them. It honours their identity.

This storytelling activity changed the class culture. The students now seem more unified and tolerant of one another. I have even developed a whole new sense of respect and admiration for these young adults. I am honored and privileged to teach them. Their story has helped me see how lucky I am.

Works Cited

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